THE BIG WESTERN MAGAZINE

MAR. 25¢

NEW WESTERN

MAGAZINE

HUNT AND KILL!
by E. HOFFMANN PRICE

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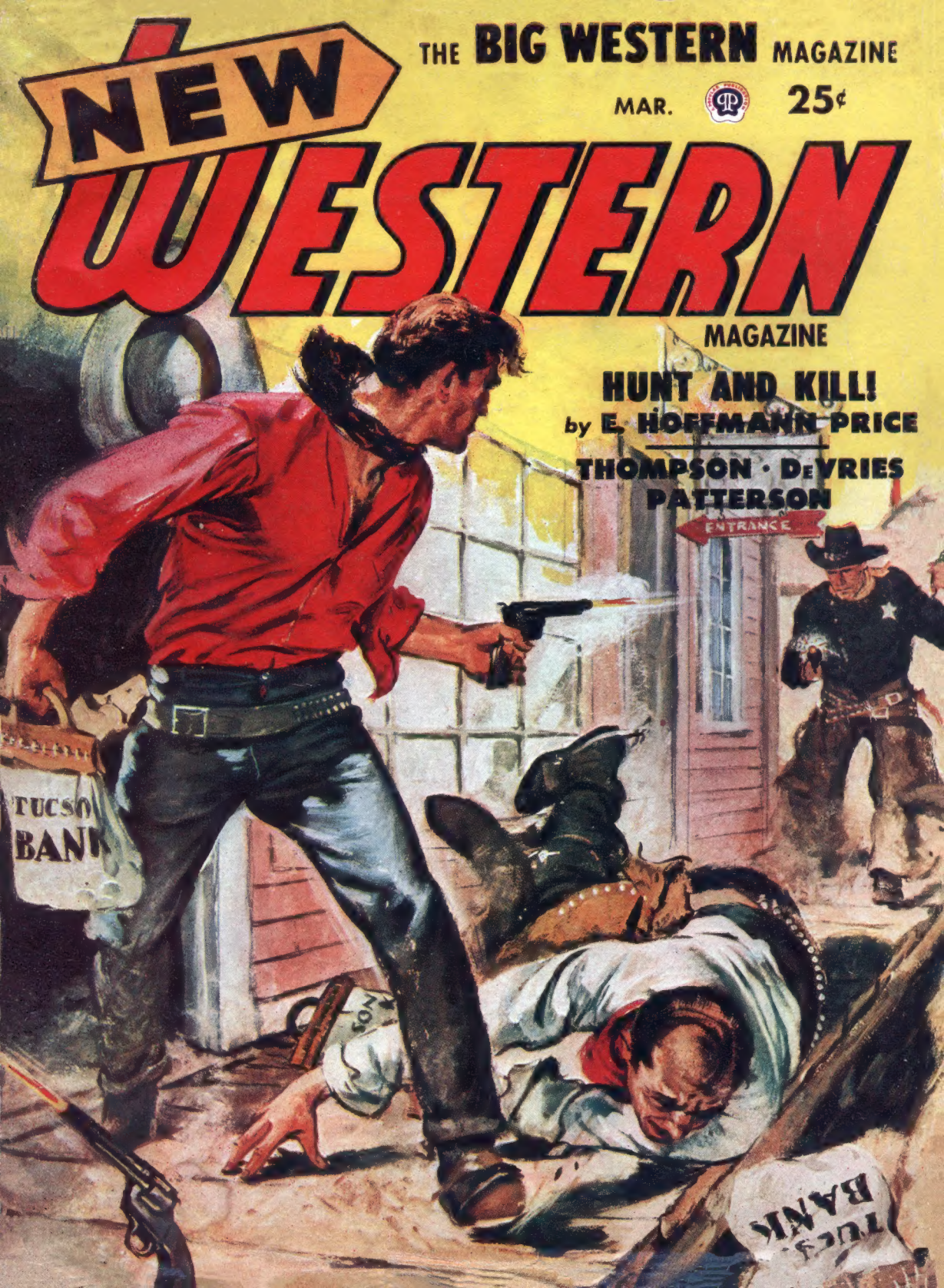
PATTERSON



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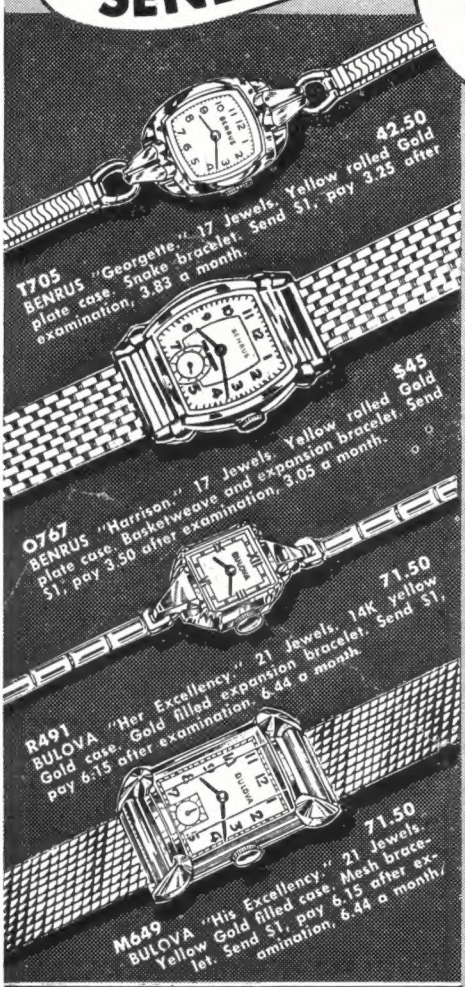

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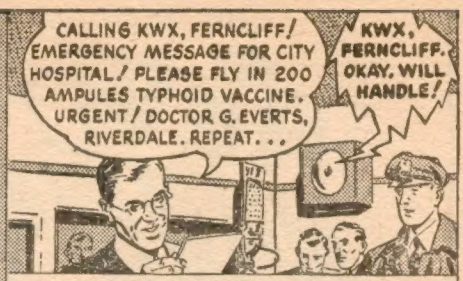
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KWX, FERNCLIFF. OKAY, WILL HANDLE!

THEIR LAND COMMUNICATIONS CUT AND WATER SUPPLY CONTAMINATED BY FLOODS, RIVERDALE'S CITIZENS ARE UNDERGOING MASS INOCULATION, BUT YOUNG DOCTOR EVERT'S SERUM SUPPLY IS RUNNING LOW AND...

ME ON YOUR NEWSCAST? GOSH, I WAS JUST GOING HOME AND CLEAN UP
DO IT AT THE STUDIO. NOW TO FIND THAT SERUM PILOT
WAIT 'TILL THE DOCTOR FINDS OUT IT'S ME!

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Vol. 19, No. 4 CONTENTS MARCH, 1949

Three Smashing Frontier Epics

HUNT AND KILL!.....E. Hoffmann Price 10
Only a man with Jeff Slater's brass-bound gall and guts could smash a range and laugh at the bloody shambles—and then fight to lift it back to its rightful place in the sun!

STEEL TRAIL GUNMAN.....Thomas Thompson 56
When the real Vance Locket, buried somewhere deep within that killer-for-hire, stood up to be counted—what verdict would be rolled out by the deadly drum-beat of blasting .45's?

ONE RED RIVER TO CROSS!.....Marvin De Vries 110
The bloodied I.O.U. for the sold-out trail herd rode in the breast pocket of Cal Todd, and—for hardcase killers—nothing made a neater bull's-eye!

Swift-Paced Range Novelette

"THEY'LL NEVER TAKE OUR LAND!".....Tom W. Blackburn 86
Smack into the bloody no-man's-land of Spanish California rode Cole and Marta Lavery—with nothing to back them but a white-hot belief in a hostile, untamed country—and an immortal faith in the power of right over might!

Four Big Cattle-Land Stories

OLD LAWMEN NEVER DIE!.....Rod Patterson 35
"The one sure thing old age can't change is the color of your guts!"

ONE-MAN WAR.....Clint Young 46
Raw courage may build an unbeatable fighting combine—or smash it to bits!

IT'S TOUGH TO BE A HERO.....Larry Holden 78
Pud Strobee could talk his way into anything—even a killer's jackpot!

BEEF—A BULLET A HEAD!.....Philip Ketchum 100
Dyer Gulch paid Joe Draper for beef on the hoof—with Colts on the barrel-head!

Two Exciting Western Features

CARAVAN OF DEATH.....L. C. Davis 6

THE RIPROARIOUS WEST.....Robbins and Farren 109

ALL STORIES NEW • NO REPRINTS • NEXT ISSUE PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 25

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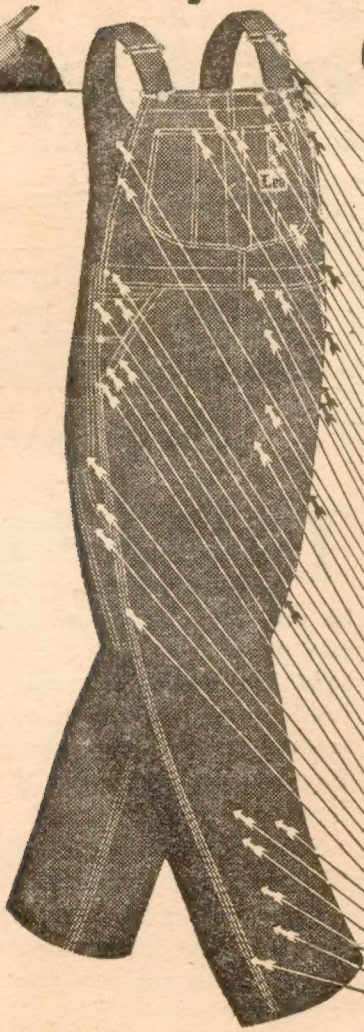

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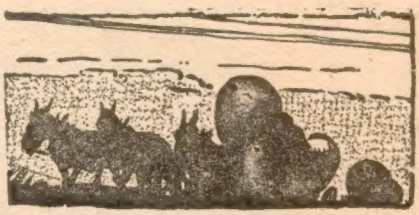
Caravan of Death



By L. C. DAVIS

THE LONGEST funeral trip in history occurred in 1855 when Dr. William Keil fulfilled a promise made to his son Willie, who died four days before the scheduled start of an emigrant train from Bethel, Missouri, to Willapa, Washington. It was even longer than the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land, bearing the bones of Joseph.

First designed as an ambulance for Willie, who had been ill with malaria but insisted on being taken along, the "prairie schooner" was converted into a plains hearse and the boy's body placed in a metal casket filled with alcohol. It headed the procession of thirty-five covered wagons that traversed the two-thousand-mile danger-infested Oregon Trail.

On the morning of May 23, 1855, the heavily-laden wagons lined up on Bethel's rutted main thoroughfare. Instead of a pistol shot the opening lines of a hymn, composed by Dr. Kiel to be sung at Willie's far western graveside—was the pre-arranged signal, and it became a chant that mingled with the sad farewells. With this funeral dirge swelling the breeze, whips

(Continued on page 8)

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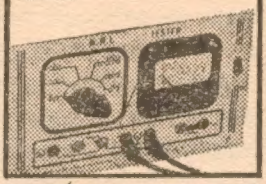
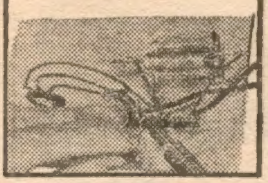
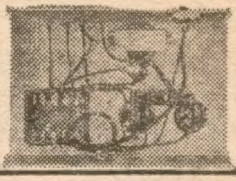
YOU PRACTICE Radio Servicing with this Tester built from parts I send. Also use it to help earn EXTRA MONEY fixing neighbors' Radios.



YOU TEST Radio Circuits like this built with parts I send. Build special circuits; learn how to locate and repair circuit defects.



YOU BUILD THIS Vacuum Tube Power Pack, make changes which give you experience, learn how to locate and correct power pack troubles.



YOU BUILD THIS A. M. Signal Generator which provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments, gives you practical experience.

YOU PRACTICE FM experiments, get more experience with this Superheterodyne receiver circuit you build with parts I send.

You Get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE With This Superheterodyne Receiver

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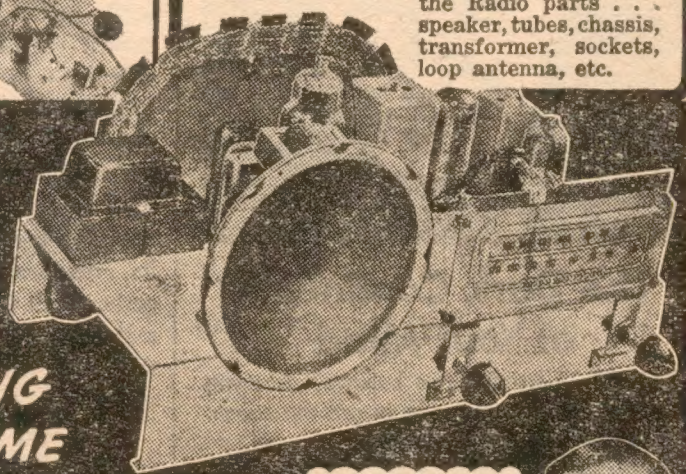

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The ROSICRUCIANS

San Jose (AMORC) California

(Continued from page 6)

cracked, men shouted, and the cavalcade began its westward trek across the rolling green Missouri hills.

After the "Big Muddy" was crossed and the terrain became rougher, stragglers from ill-fated wagon trains told gruesome tales of Indian attacks at every outpost, but the colonists, unafraid under the leadership of their "prophet, priest and king," pressed on across the rolling prairies toward the distant purple foothills. As they traveled the wearisome miles, they choked on the grit of dust storms, topped boulder-strewn ridges and glided through lush-green valleys.

Often during that long, sad journey, they were accosted—but never attacked—by large bands of Indians, their superstitious nature deeply touched by the sacredness and mystery of the lead wagon with its unique and weird burden. This, together with the magic music from stringed and reed instruments and human voices, that filled the air above the bier, was big medicine to the red men.

When the caravan paused at nightfall small bands of savages visited them in an effort to satisfy their curiosity. They were treated with the utmost kindness and courtesy, after which they would silently withdraw, more baffled than ever. But they kept a safe distance from the hearse.

Six months after leaving Missouri the emigrants arrived at their destination. On December 26 a band of community musicians, carrying the American flag, preceded the long-delayed burial party. Singing the hymn that was used at the start of the long westward journey, Willie Kiel's body was laid to rest.

"It wasn't a pleasant thing for Dr. Kiel," said one veteran colonist, "but it made people think. The purpose was plain; he had given his promise; a colonist dared not lie!"

BETTERIN' the VETERAN

—a story about

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is like thousands of veterans who are cashing in on their opportunities through **I. C. S.**

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HUNT AND KILL!

CHAPTER ONE

A Damned Wide Loop!

THE smell of mesquite smoke had warned Slater, and he and his boss, the lanky Englishman, had left their horses in the arroyo. Unless you knew that piece of the Rafter LH range by heart, you'd never suspect that such a gash in the flats existed until you got right to the very edge of it.

That made it easy for Slater to slip up on foot and get a look at whoever heated iron and burned hair and hide.

After a piece of tough going afoot, Jeff

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

They'd finished giving the cows a touching-up with the running-iron.

Only a man with the brass-bound gall and guts to rob a range blind of its gold and silver and then laugh at the shambles he'd left, could come back like Jeff Slater did—and lift, by the main strength of his good right arm, that ravaged, ruined cattle country back to its rightful, shining place in the sun. . . .

Slater and the owner of the Rafter LH reached a place from which they figured they'd fool the running-iron experts Len Hardy had spotted with field glasses. Cautiously, Slater peeped over the edge, his squarish face twisted in a sour grimace.

"Not a bad job they're doing, making our brand over into Diamond EM. Savvy now why our critters aren't increasing and multiplying?"

Len Hardy fingered his straw-colored mustaches. "Very handy." The Englishman's long, narrow face became more pessimistic looking than ever. Even when he was feeling all right, he had an expression like calamity on the hoof. "I presume that their story will be that Diamond EM cattle all drop twins?"

Jeff Slater's jaw and mouth clamped like a bear trap. He was younger than he looked, and not merely because he was swarthy with heavy black brows and a tendency to get a visible start on a fresh crop of whiskers before he'd got his razor dry. He was very much too old around the eyes, and his forehead was deeply bitten by frown lines. The bank failure had marked him, particularly since it had been his bank. Nobody in Ojo Grande had any use for Slater. Instead of running out after the crash, he had taken a job with Len Hardy.

The two eyed each other: the Englishman who had lost only half his cattle in the blizzard, and the cowtown banker who had lost his shirt. Hardy asked, "Do you know the lookout? I've seen the branding expert in town."

"Both of 'em." Slater fingered the .30-30 Winchester he'd taken from his saddle. "Block Reeder and—Mike Allison. That's a new brand. Probably registered it to take care of Rafter LH critters."

He thumbed the loading gate of the carbine and let up on it. Hardy, sensing his man's conflicting urges, tried to make the most of Slater's hesitancy. "I'd rather not have any shooting. See here, you know those chaps by name: I could identify them. I'll swear out a warrant."

Slater spat. "They'd be acquitted. The blizzard left you with half your critters on the hoof when spring came. You, and a couple others. The rest of 'em are counting one cow where they used to tally ten. Stealing from you is no crime, not atall."

Like a good many other Englishmen, Hardy had come to the States a few years previous to make a million in American cattle. After having made that mistake, he did not compound it, as had nearly everyone else, by going crazy during the beef boom, borrowing to buy so many critters that the range was overstocked.

Then, too, he had a couple of sheltered canyons. All in all, beginner's luck and slow-going caution had pulled Len Hardy through. And now, having survived, he was pained and puzzled at learning that he could not depend on local law.

"Easy shot," Slater went on. "But I don't like gun law. They were cleaned out like I was. They're trying to save their hides."

HE THRUST the carbine into Hardy's hands, and after explaining how he proposed to compromise, he left his boss and worked his way up the arroyo. When he reached a spot to his taste, he turned, waved to Hardy, and scrambled up to the lip.

Behind him, the carbine whacked. The Englishman's shot kicked up dust a couple of yards from the pair who were earmarking and branding the last of the two calves they'd hogtied. They'd finished giving the cows a touching up.

The artist dropped his running-iron. The lookout took a dive for a mesquite clump, facing the direction of Hardy's purposely wide shot. While the two were still rattled from surprise, and from force of habit, still looked for gunsmoke—the new-fangled .30-30 gave no more than a

wisp of lavender haze—Slater came to the surface. He gained yard after yard before the crunch of boots told the rustlers that they had been flanked.

"Hold it! Drop those guns."

Slater's Colt was at his hip. Having them covered, he could settle this without gun play. These men were comrades in distress. As a banker, he had loaned them money they should not have had, and in so doing, he had busted them and his bank also. The collapse of the boom had been bad. The blizzard made it fatal. He wanted to give these men a chance.

For answer, the two cursed fiercely. They swivelled about on the ground, to look into the muzzle of Slater's Peacemaker.

Block Reeder snarled, "First with a mortgage, now with a gun!"

"Easy, Block," Slater said, quietly as though soothing a frightened horse. "Take it easy."

The other, Mike Allison, was gray-faced. He licked his lips. Clearly, he and Block expected a necktie party, not stopping to think that Slater could have shot them down without parley. They were too scared to think. He felt that of a sudden, he had lost control, and that he had only gun-command of the situation.

"This isn't shooting business," he went on, quietly, and with the hope that his own desperation did not goad them further from their senses. "You two—"

He holstered his pistol. He was not taking the chance he seemed to. This had been made clear during the attempted robbery of the bank, during its first year: the man who had Slater covered had dropped with a cold gun in his hand and two slugs in his chest. Reeder and Allison knew all about that encounter, yet the fact that Slater had holstered his weapon should have calmed them.

Perhaps it would have, had not Hardy, feeling cheap about staying under cover while his man did the hard work, come up over the edge. Too late, Slater realized that the gesture which was to have quieted the two rustlers had alarmed Hardy.

And it was too late. The rustlers must have figured that a private posse was about to take them for a ride to distant cottonwoods.

Reeder snarled and grabbed his gun. Still flat on the ground, he believed he had a chance. Allison, prodded crazy by the move, clawed for his Colt. Hardy yelled. But the smack of the .30-30 was the last of the gunblasts which made a three-cornered hell for a second or two.

Slater's gun was out and smoking. Reeder crumpled, drilled between the eyes. Billowing smoke hid most of what followed. A wild slug kicked up rock and dirt. Slater was blinded, both eyes useless and tear-drenched from fragments. But he kept coming. A cow shielded Mike Allison from Hardy's fire, and then a bolting horse helped cover the rancher who ran, and got to his own mount.

"Let him go!" Slater shouted. He wiped his eyes, and sighed. "Well, I tried. But there's only one way I can shoot."

"Ah—I say—I thought you were quite mad, holstering that pistol. Did I—?"

"Of course you didn't pot him. He faced me."

IN THE morning, Slater said he'd haul Block Reeder to Ojo Grande, and when Hardy insisted that that was his own responsibility, Slater said, "You're right, but with the way I've been unpopular ever since the bank failed, I've got to face the town. Well, we can both go, but you leave your gun at home. If there is any trouble with Block Reeder's friends, it'll be personal—dating from back before I worked with you."

What Slater set forth was strictly true. However, there was more to it than he let on. He wanted to go to Ojo Grande to see what had happened to Syria Palfrey and her millinery store. After so

much of avoiding her and town, he had to face it.

He had talked too optimistically, and Syria had believed in him, in Ojo Grande, and in the beef boom. Coming into a small legacy, she had let him encourage her in her long cherished idea of running a business of her own.

Slater and Hardy drove to town in the buckboard, with Slater's blue roan, Comanche, trailing along at the tail gate. "Remember," Slater prompted, as they pulled up at the sheriff's office, "you didn't recognize the man who got away, and neither did I."

The formalities were short. The sheriff was grateful that there was only a killing to report, and that Len Hardy was not swearing out a warrant for the one who had escaped.

Once that was attended to, Slater said, "Don't wait for me, I'm staying in town to kick up my heels a bit. Things'll be quiet at the ranch for a spell."

The town looked bleak. A haberdashery, a hardware store, and a barber shop were boarded up. Notices of public auction to liquidate assets were pasted on windows or tacked on doors. Syria Palfrey's Bon Ton Millinery was closed. No wonder. Not even the honkytonk girls could afford new hats. The other women, ranch and town alike, were blossoming out with homemade sun bonnets.

Yet there was one bright touch of prosperity: Cyrus Gordon's red-wheeled buggy and Morgan mare, at the hitch rack in front of the surviving general store. Gordon himself stood there, studying the Traders & Drovers Bank across the street.

This was Jeff Slater's failure. It was closed, but Gordon stood there, regarding it with possessive interest. Wouldn't take an awful lot of money to open it up again. And Gordon had plenty of Eastern capital to buy out whoever had failed, or was going to fail.

Slater's face set as though he were biting a ten-penny nail in half. For a moment, he fought the urge to avoid Gordon and bolt through the swinging doors of Crockett's Saloon. Instead, he kept going until Gordon turned and greeted him.

The newcomer wore store clothes, but he didn't for a second look like a tenderfoot. His eyes were level and far-seeing. While he didn't give the impression of bull-headedness, his angular face and beaked nose were strong and purposeful as the set of his teeth in the cigar he champed.

"Seeing the cargo you and Hardy brought in made me feel a bit better," Gordon said jovially.

"How come? I didn't like that chore a bit."

Gordon explained, "Every neighbor who amounts to enough to be stolen from is solid enough not to steal from me. After all, we can't restock everyone's range!"

"That's gospel," Slater had to admit. Then, "I heard you have plans for the Traders & Drovers."

"Town does need a bank," was the noncommittal answer. "People still eat beef, and there are better days ahead." Gordon studied him for a moment. "See here, Slater. You know this country, and you had a case of much more bad luck than bad judgment. You're being kicked around harder than you deserve."

"Thanks," Slater answered dryly. "I hadn't noticed it."

"If that bank—" he gestured with his cigar—"were reorganized, you could be very useful. You in a hurry to go somewhere?"

"All depends. What's on your mind?"

BEFORE Gordon could answer, a man wearing levis and a leather vest interposed, as though he had been waiting for a chance to cut in. Slater had had no warning of the man's approach. He won-

dered how he could have been woolgathering enough to have failed to notice that someone had come up almost to his elbow.

The newcomer was of Slater's height and build. Though swarthy, and with prominent cheek bones, he wasn't a half-breed. The stolid secretiveness of smooth face and dark eyes vanished when he said, "You're liable to miss the whole trial, Mr. Gordon. I thought I'd better let you know."

"Oh—well—thank you, Mr. Crane."

Gordon dismissed Crane with a nod of thanks. Slater watched the man go back toward the court house. He observed, "Smoothest moving hombre I ever seen."

Gordon ignored the remark. "Come on," he urged. "We can talk."

In this last, he was wrong. The trial moved like a house afire. The four cattle thieves, electing to be tried together, sat there like public benefactors. Shorty Ellis, Dale Martin, Slim Jarvis, and Walt Blake —who had been caught restocking their range with critters belonging to Gordon and to several others—were not worried. The defense challenged every juror who had more steers than he could load into a buckboard, and then challenged the prosecutor to do his worst.

The jury went through the motions of filing out, filing back, and giving the verdict they'd been ready to give before court had been called to order: not guilty.

Shouts and cheers made the shingles rattle. Gordon smiled and said, "They're not bothering to thank the jury, and there is so much noise I'd not have a chance." He opened his watch, frowned, snapped it shut. "I'd plumb forgot! Slater, why not come out and see me at the ranch? Good day, sir."

They parted at the court house steps.

Slater, once more passing the bank he had organized, wondered how he could fit into Gordon's plans. He wondered also whether he would want to fit, even if he could. Gordon, now across the street, was talking to a cattleman who, like Len Hardy, had not been too badly hurt. Crane, the stranger in town, came from the court house, smoothly as a stalking panther, and made for the stage station.

A bitter-eyed man wearing a deputy's star blocked Slater's way. Tight-faced, he stood there, thumbs hooked in his gun belt.

Slater checked himself up sharply. "Hello, Ben."

"Pretty foxy, claiming you didn't recognize the jigger that got away when you smoked out Block Reeder."

"What's so foxy about giving a man a chance instead of giving him a bad name?"

Ben Worley spat. "Protection in advance, just in case that man is found drygulched—whoever he is. Nice work, being gun hand for big money."

"That star you're wearing isn't your only protection."

"What else is?" Worley challenged.

"You and me and a lot of others," Slater explained, patiently, "needed a lesson and we paid for it. You and me alike —that's what's protecting you now as much as your star. Now you hear me out, once for all! Len Hardy isn't big money. He was just too slow and thick-headed to get het up about getting rich quick. And I did my damndest to give Block Reeder a chance."

"Chance!"

"Go look at him. Smeared with soot from branding, and blood from earmarking. And a .45 did it. You don't drygulch a man with a sixgun—or can you shoot that far and straight with one? If I'd wanted to, I could've got 'em both, with a Winchester, neither of them ever getting a chance to crook a trigger finger."

He paused, lowered his voice. "I'm still giving *you* a chance, but don't crowd me too far with talk like that."

Worley snorted and stamped across the

street. The change from cattleman to lawman hadn't done him much good.

CHAPTER TWO

The Phantom Bushwhacker

SLATER stepped into the Santa Fe Restaurant and seated himself on a stool at the counter before he noticed that the girl, half turned from him as she flipped hotcakes on the griddle, was familiar. The set of her shoulders, the tilt of her fine, small head, the curl of her dark hair and the glint of sunlight in it, identified her even before he caught the curve of her cheek and throat. This was Syria Palfrey, and he had had his share in putting her behind that counter, slinging hash.

Involuntarily, he hitched back from the stool. She faced about. Slater checked himself, put his palms on the counter, and hunched forward. This was about the last way in which he'd wanted to meet her, but since it had to be that way . . .

"Hello, Jeff. What'll it be?"

Her smile blossomed from within, completing that expression of eager friendliness which came in part from the flare of nostrils, and somewhat from the wide-openness of her dark eyes. It offset the independent tilt of chin, and kept her mouth from being too firm. He pictured Syria always as a smile and a brightness: and this was a memory which went back to their school days.

"Anything but beans," he answered. "When'd you come back?"

"Or do you mean, *why?*"

The retort made him forget the hostility of the town. He grinned and said, "Suit yourself about that."

"Oh, I've been back a month now. Where have—well, why haven't you been to town?"

"You know why."

"Well, yes, of course."

Yet he answered the query: "I don't look any too good these days to anyone. Funny, some of them deposited money with me, which is to say, they loaned me their spare cash. Some of them borrowed from the bank, money I had a right to put out on loan. Then all those that had deposited money, knowing the ways and purposes of banks, came whooping up of a sudden to take it back. So I had to ask those the bank had loaned to, to pay up, so I could pay up. They couldn't, and I couldn't—and now they're sick of cussing the blizzard which is gone, and so they cuss me."

He went on to say that he'd have ham and eggs and French fries, and that cornmeal was a shooting word. Rather than choose between apple pie and peach cobbler, he figured it'd be easier to take both.

"You've put my appetite back where it belongs."

"Didn't I hear a lot of cheering and yelling a few minutes ago?"

"Sure did. Trial's over."

"What'd they get?"

"Got acquitted. About the worst thing that could've happened."

His vehemence brought a query to Syria's mind, but before she could voice it, two ranchers, sitting in the far corner, shoved their chairs back and jarred their table in their haste to get clear of it.

"What's so bad about that, Slater?" the bull-necked one demanded.

The other, hatchet-faced, put in his bit: "Got to pull for Gordon and the money crowd you're working for, eh?"

Slater was on his feet, balanced and ready for anything. His answer was smooth as his move to face them. "Dawson," he said to one, "if Gordon hadn't brought money from the East to buy up paper my busted bank held, you would not have got the last couple dividends they dished out to depositors."

Then, to the other, "Weller, I'll tell you what is bad about acquitting cow thieves.

When juries begin turning 'em loose to steal some more—lookee here, what would *you* do, next time you caught someone working over your brand?"

"Gordon's hogging the whole country."

"That's not answering me, so I'll answer for myself. If you could afford it, you'd hire gun hands tó track down thieves just like you'd hunt a lobo or any other varmint. That jury just now asked for war and all sorts of killings."

THE two snorted their own contempt of logic. They paid their checks and left, muttering. Syria said, "Jeff, people used to look to you for their thinking. You always had an old head on young shoulders. If it does come to more thieving, and the kind of killings you spoke of, we'll need your thinking again."

"Thinking!" he flared. "Least of all mine, when no one's thinking at all is what they're full of now. Sure, they're desperate, the poor devils, scrabbling and scratching, and figuring the outsiders ought to dish out breeding stock gratis. Today has left me plumb fed up, and if it weren't for leaving Len Hardy in the lurch, I'd pack my war bag and move on."

"No, Jeff, you would not. I came back, didn't I?"

"All right, Syria, you did. Hearing you makes it worth staying."

"Think you could get a stake and buy your dad's old place back?"

"If it's not bought before I get the chance."

"Gordon hasn't taken it. Why'd he skip that spread?"

"What he's buying up is like a checkerboard—getting key spots that control what he isn't buying. And if there is war, nobody'll have the guts to use range that close to his property—whether you stole from him or not, it'd still be dangerous as Indian country used to be. Nobody but gun hands'd work for you."

"Suppose he spreads himself out too wide and too thin? What happens then?"

Slater grinned. "Honey, you're a mind reader. Well, I got to drift."

"Don't stay away so long, Jeff."

He paused at the door. "Be back a-purpose to see you, next time."

And when he rode back to the Rafter LH, he was thinking of Gordon's intent study of the busted bank. That could pry the lid off of hell, and end by Gordon's being spread out too thin. But Slater hated the thought of all the trouble which would come to the country before Gordon blew up—if indeed such a thing could happen.

Before the week was up, Shorty Ellis, acquitted by the jury, got a permanent immunity to arrest. He was found neatly drilled by a .30-30, and under his head was a page torn from a pocket size dictionary. The word "thief" was underscored in pencil. The only sign that anyone could cut was that of Shorty's own horse. Considering that the man had been shot from the saddle in a piece of country so open and flat that it didn't offer cover for a horned toad, it looked as if he had been bushwhacked by a phantom.

When Slater heard the news, he had none of the satisfaction of a prophet who had made good. He regretted his own outspokenness, and he began to wonder about smooth-moving Crane, the stranger who had taken in the trial with such keen interest. Probably Crane had actually left town, but he might have come back secretly.

Slater and Hardy decided to ride out to talk to Gordon. They found the owner of many new brands in the big ranch house, the old Boxed K which he had taken over. He sat in the office he had rigged up in the one-time "best room." A partition had been knocked out to make additional office space. There a bookkeeper was at work on the rancher's many accounts.

"Sit down, gentlemen," Gordon said. "Wish I had more neighbors like you."

He meant, *More outfits that aren't rustling.*

At Hardy's nudge, Slater began, "We aim to be neighborly. Now, not mentioning names—but somebody's turned loose a bounty-hunter with a dictionary."

"So I hear."

"We're small change compared to you, but with a dictionary-toting scalp-hunter at work, Len and I are sure going to be figured out as chipping in with those who have put that chap on the job. Still not mentioning names, the outfits that did open up with this first lesson to juries and cow thieves are going to end by getting the whole district so hostile that they'll find they've bit off more than they can chew. Whoever started this is trying something that can't work any way but backwards, like a shot gun with mud jamming up the muzzle."

GORDON considered gravely. "Yes, you gentlemen are good neighbors, coming to tell me your views. Perhaps you have heard that self-preservation is the first law of nature?"

"Had just that in mind, Mr. Gordon," Len Hardy said. "Brooding over it is what brought us here. Good-day, sir."

"Just a moment. We disagree, but honestly. With that stipulated, let us have a drink."

He dug a quart of Old Crow from his desk, and shoved out three tumblers. He passed out cigars. He grinned all over his face when he noted how Slater's glance shifted from bookcase to bookcase, seeking a gap in the rows on the shelves.

"Nothing but classics, and that big Webster. Here's to friendliness in disagreement."

They drank to that, and then hauled out. After riding a piece, Hardy asked, "What can we do about it? And we shall have to do something, for when resentment becomes strong, we'll be the first ones to feel it—because we are least able to defend ourselves from all of them."

"I been thinking."

"So I inferred from watching you the past few minutes. But what?"

"Can't rightly say, not just now."

And Slater dummied up like a Chinaman facing a customer who'd lost his laundry ticket.

He remained dummied up when, ten days later, he got word of the shooting of a man long suspected of dabbing a sticky loop, but never caught dead to rights. This man had under his head a dictionary page with "skunk" underlined. And still keeping his own counsel, Slater rode to Ojo Grande.

When he walked the length of the main street, he had a twitching between his shoulders. People pretended they didn't see him. Syria, behind the restaurant counter, was the first break in the solid front of hostility.

"Jeff, your going to see Gordon has hurt you a lot. Since they can't very easily get him, they're all too likely to take it out of your hide."

He nodded. "I've been thinking on that. When's your day off?"

"Tomorrow. Why?"

"Want you to take a buggy ride with me." He jingled some coins in his pocket and mimicked a small boy gloating over great wealth. "This town's too unsociable."

"Oh, that'd be fun, I'd love it. But I bet it's for more than giving us a change from town."

"That's gospel, honey." He lowered his voice. "This is for the customers and dishwasher not to hear. Len Hardy's doing nicely enough to stake me to a few dollars. That gives me a chance to buy back dad's old spread, the one I was plumb fool enough to sell to ante in enough cash to open a bank."

"Jeff, how marvelous!" Then her face darkened. "But—"

"But, my eye! These skillet-heads are

not freezing me out of my stamping grounds. This is my country, I am sticking to it, with it, in it. That'll show these bedevilled fellows I am not a Gordon silent partner. Be nice if you and I sized the old house up. See if it's fit for a woman to live in."

"A woman? Is she nice?"

"Uh-huh. Kind of slimmish, but still and all, solid built, and she used to own a millinery store."

"Oh. But now she's a hash-slinger?"

"You're a mind reader."

"Well, no harm looking at the old home. Even if I don't think it's in livable shape any more."

Her eyes told him she was pretty certain the place would suit the woman behind the counter. And she was so all-over pleased that he hated to spoil it by mentioning that on his way down the street, he'd watched a man tacking up a reward poster: one thousand dollars—a hefty sum, considering the times—for the dictionary man, dead or alive, preferably the former.

Syria would hear about it soon enough —and let someone else tell her that he now had a splendid chance of being picked off by almost any disgruntled citizen who figured a thousand bucks would come in handy.

CHAPTER THREE

Big Birds with Red Eyes

THE following day, as they left Ojo Grande in a livery rig, Syria said, "That reward notice kept me thinking all night long that you've got to get a fresh start now. You can put yourself in a different light. It's worth it, even if we do starve for a couple years."

"You sure you meant *we?*"

"It's we, Jeff—you and me. Your bank and my store, your notions and my notions on being important, they always made a wall between us that kept us apart."

When they got to the house which Slater had inherited from his father, desolation mocked him. Most of the windows were broken. The whining wind made a shutter slam and creak. The front door sagged from its hinges. Saddle tramps had torn boards from tool shed and barn for fuel.

After a moment of peering through the doorway, Slater said, "The fellow who bought this just wanted the land to increase his holdings during the boom. Couldn't bother with an old house. Now he's got nothing at all to bother with."

He nudged her elbow. Planks creaked underfoot when she stepped in. Wallpaper flapped in tatters. Finally, stopping before the big fireplace, Syria said. "It's like a human being going to pieces from neglect. But fix the roof, do a few things, and the old place'll come to life. It'll even sound better." Then, after a pause, "Let's go out where your father and mother are buried."

"I brought a sickle, thinking of that," he answered, and followed her to the buggy. He added, as they drove toward a clump of trees some distance from the house, "That plot was never sold."

Slater had hardly a recollection of his mother. "No wonder the old man was so crusty," he said, setting to work cutting the rank grass which hid the headstones. "For all his shining up to your ma, he never got anywhere. Then he got stubborn and wouldn't have any of the gals he could've had instead."

Syria picked up a sheaf and toted it clear of the plot. "But she did think a lot of him. Used to speak of him, after my dad passed on, and her voice and face were a dead giveaway. But too much water had run under the bridge, she'd say, and no fool like an old fool. So you and I escaped being kinfolk by marriage."

Slater sighed reminiscently. "The old man had sense enough not to risk high

finance on a small scale. He wasn't such a fool at that."

"The old devil, burying that gold!" Syria laughed softly. "Never trusted banks, and look at you."

He got to his feet as though yanked by the scruff of the neck.

"What's that? Buried *which?*"

"Gold, Jeff. An ace in the hole. Don't tell me you didn't know, that he didn't tell you."

"He didn't. How do you know?"

"He told Ma, while he was courting her, years ago. She never repeated it to me till she got to the looking-back age."

Slater eyed her. "No, you're not hoorawing me. Where'd he put it?"

"How *I* know? It was just an old woman's story, to me. I never till this minute mentioned it. Why should I? I took it for granted you'd know, and dug it up when you started banking."

"Honey, judging from your yarn, it was buried when I was too young to be told. And I bet he finally forgot where he'd put it and felt foolish telling me he'd plumb forgot. They do it, every time. During my couple years in business, I heard of several cases."

"Jeff, there's your stake. You sold the land, but the gold is yours. It always was."

"If I can find it." He looked at the headstone for a moment, and raised his hat. "Sleep well, folks. I'm coming back home."

Silently, Syria went with him to the buggy. As he helped her in, she asked, "Shan't we start looking?"

He shok his head. "Maybe if I came out here to sleep in the old place, something'll come back to my mind. A hunch, I mean. Don't you frown that way, trying so hard to think. Anything you force that way, it is likely to be plumb cockeyed. Ease up, and maybe some more of what your Ma said will come back naturally and straight."

WHEN Slater let Syria out at Bardwell's and went to get Comanche for the ride home, the sheriff popped out from the harness maker's shop and nudged him into the doorway of a vacant store.

"Jeff, can you take some straight talk without getting riled?"

"Make it straight, Sam. I am fed up with me and Hardy being classed with Gordon and his silent partners. Let's hear it."

"I'd breathe easier if you moved for other parts."

"Ordering me to buy a trunk?"

"Well, hell! Of course not. But I'd hate to see something happen to you. Len Hardy's getting along pretty well, you'd not be leaving him in the lurch. And if you and Syria mean business—shucks, you're not making it easier for her, hanging around here."

"You been listening to that tinhorn deputy of yours. You tell Ben Worley that I belong here, and anyone wanting me to leave can figure he'll have to shoot me out of here. So long, Sam."

Once he had Ojo Grande well behind him, Slater took the binoculars from his saddle pocket and sized up the country ahead of him. The ground rose gently at first, and then with increasing pitch. The trail led to a summit over which towered rocky pinnacles. There was another trail far to his right. It skirted a low hogback which projected from the buttress that towered over the way he aimed to take.

Circling buzzards caught his eye. Someone might have beefed a cow to make off with her calf—safer than brand alterations. Or, the dictionary man might have been at work. In the stretch ahead, daylight ambushing would not be difficult.

Far as he could look along the off trail he had the country all to himself, but he realized that such an idea was dangerous for an unpopular man. Thus, while the presence of buzzards in all likelihood

did not signify anything important to him, they gave further form to the mood which had been shaping up.

Finally the rise of the ground got him high enough to look down on the hogback spur reaching out from the hills. Presently he was able to see what was on its farther side.

Two men rode along the trail which, after paralleling his for awhile, angled off. Some moments later they passed from sight.

This was odd business. They must have been waiting, screened by the hogback, else he'd seen them going across the flat space he himself had been crossing. Or, if they had been riding toward Ojo Grande, it was mighty funny they'd be turning around as he hove into view.

Dust rose—not much, but enough to prod him to further thought.

"First they got nothing to do and all day to do it in, and now they're breaking their necks to make up for lost time, after seeing which fork I took," he speculated. "And supposing costs nothing."

He booted Comanche. The situation had possibilities. Beyond the next ridge was a ravine up which the riders could work their way and intercept him. Except by riding the daylights out of his horse, Slater could not possibly pass the danger spot before the two riders, favored by flat ground until the final short stretch, got themselves all set and under cover.

The blue roan was badly winded when Slater dismounted. Ahead and to his right was a draw; the trail skirted its head. He took his carbine from the boot and went downgrade until he had command of the upper reaches of the draw. Looking back, he noted that Comanche could not be seen. The angle of a buttress hid him.

After covering another hundred yards, Slater wedged himself into a nest of boulders. He was breathing easily now, though his lips were dry, and his pulse hammering. Presently, he heard rocks clatter in the draw. The wind favored him, and he got the scent of hard-ridden horses. Whoever was on the way had been pounding leather.

Two men hove into view. Both were panting from exertion. They were sweating and battered from floundering about in high-heeled boots. One was Mike Allison, the brand-changer Slater had tried to give a talking to instead of a bullet. The other was Walt Blake, one of the three survivors of the four who had been acquitted. Each had a Winchester.

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NEITHER spoke, when ordinarily they should have been cursing the rocks and the ocotillo stalks whose inch-long thorns needled them. They would have had breath for words had they not been on a mission which went against the grain. Riled, brooding, and now outraged by the dictionary man who picked off others like them, they were hitting back blindly, yet without relishing what they had set out to do.

This was a chore for one man. But these men needed company, each to buck up the other. They'd had a few drinks. The odor was plain when they passed close to Slater.

He had plumb forgot about the wheeling buzzards.

He let Allison and Blake climb up a piece. They stopped, now that they were up high enough to have a clear sight of the trail. They eyed each other and burrowed down among boulders. Though not concealed from Slater's position, they would be invisible to anyone riding up over the summit.

Slater did not challenge them because he hoped they would presently exchange a few words concerning whoever they expected. But for his wariness, he'd not be coming into sight for another ten minutes or so. They'd be talking.

Comanche, however, broke the deadlock by stepping from behind the buttress of the summit.

"I'll be a son of a gun!" Allison exclaimed. "His hoss, all right."

Slater shouted, "'Be,' hell! You *are* one! Get up, the both of you."

Neither had a chance to swivel about with rifle, much less draw a hand gun. Both knew he had them dead to rights. They gaped, gulped, groped for words, and found none.

"Can't you jiggers let well enough alone?" Slater demanded.

"All right, get it over with!" Allison croaked. "First Reeder, now me—get it done and over with. You got us neat."

"Don't get worked up. Reeder made me drill him. I aimed to give you both a chance to straighten out. I'm not siding Gordon's crowd. My boss isn't. You fools are playing right into his hands and we'll all end by being shoved out, feuding among ourselves. Get the hell out of here and say nothing. This is between us three. But if either of you ever makes a false move again, or even looks as if he's honing to collect a thousand bucks by taking my scalp and claiming I am the dictionary man, I won't palaver. Now, git!"

They fairly fell over themselves to obey.

Then Slater learned why the buzzards wheeled. High up, above the head of the draw, a rifle cracked. Blake, hit dead center and dusted front and rear, pitched in a heap. His Winchester clattered ahead of him. Allison yelled and floundered. Slater was even faster making for cover.

Whack!

He thought a hammer had flattened against his head. The slug, clipping a rock, had bounced and pounded him on the hatband. Though numbed and unable to return the sniper's fire, he was clearly conscious of all that went on. Allison, darting like a lizard down the draw, now had plenty of cover. The hidden gunner, lacking a target, wasted no ammunition.

Finally rocks quit clattering. Slater wormed himself end for end and scanned the upper slopes. He could see nothing but ocotillo clumps and acacia scrub, but he took no chances. He waited and watched the shadows lengthen. He watched the buzzards perch on outcroppings about Blake. They, too, were waiting. Apparently the man, thought soundless and motionless, was not yet stone dead.

As he lay there, cramped by the protecting rocks, Slater reasoned, "The buzzards saw the dictionary man; they knew he is a good provider. He must be up there, waiting. Most likely can't collect his

bounty unless he puts his claim check under Blake's head, so whoever's paying him will know who did the killing. Can't help figuring I'm dead as Blake. He'll be down."

This thought sustained Slater against aches and cramps. His trigger finger, not under any strain, would work nicely.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Madman's Bonanza

DARKNESS came—darkness and cold, both of which made Slater mistrust his logic. The man could have fired from a skyline spot from which he had withdrawn, going down the backslope. Slater moved, but cautiously, and without a normal breath until he got to the angle where Comanche waited.

His mind was made up. To redeem himself, and to rid his old stamping grounds of a secret killer, he would stalk the man until he beat him at his own game.

He flung the reins over the pommel to make it easy for the blue roan to head home. In addition to the binoculars, he dipped from the saddle pockets several stone-hard biscuits and a chunk of bacon six or eight inches long. This was bait left over from a ride of the line shacks.

He likewise found a box of .30-30's, a few rawhide thongs, and a pair of heavy socks. After taking the Winchester from its boot, he slapped Comanche on the rump, and backtracked afoot.

At the Rafter LH, they'd figure he'd been shot from the saddle. In Ojo Grande, a lot of his former customers would be happy for the same reason. Mike Allison, if he were inclined to talk about his attempt at bushwhacking, would in all probability conclude that Slater and a concealed ally had reversed the ambush, and that Slater was anything but dead.

However, two conflicting yarns would make a better screen than would either a single true or false one. Chances were that Allison, shocked silly and running for his life, had a pretty badly garbled picture of what had happened.

"But the dictionary man called all the steps, and he knows. He might figure I was badly hurt, and crawled away among the rocks to die. Len Hardy'll most likely think the same way when he comes looking and can't find my carcass."

So reasoning, Slater stretched his legs until, well away from the ambush, he took off his boots. He cut off the uppers and with rawhide thongs made sandals.

Several hours later, well in advance of moonlight, he slipped into the quarter where Syria lived. Being well off the main drag, there were no lights. No one was stirring. He tapped at her window. She did not answer. His first perception was a whitish blur in the gloom, and then she was at the sill, with a blanket about her shoulders.

"I was awake and thinking of you so hard I couldn't sleep," she whispered. "What's happened?"

In a few words he told her. He explained his plan, and concluded, "It's more than just nailing the dictionary man—the chore is to prove that Gordon and other newcomers like him have put that man on the job. The way Gordon talked to me, baited me into sitting with him at the trial, found he didn't have anything to say just then, and asked me out to the ranch—all that gives me the hunch that he was aiming to use me. I think the shooting scrape with Block Reeder was mostly to get people suspicious of me. With that and my bank's failure, he'd have a better welcome when and if he opens a bank of his own. I'll be on the prowl two-three days at a time. Then come back for grub. Just bacon and biscuits."

"Oh, don't come back here. I'll take it to the old house and leave it there."

"You'd be noticed, sure."

"I'll make sure that I am noticed. I'll drive out boldly and brazenly. With some plants to pretty up your parents' graves."

He swallowed an objection, and agreed, "For sure, that's natural, when you hear about Comanche coming in without me, doing some sentimental trick like that. Not knowing where I am planted."

He reached up and she bent down to kiss him. "Do be careful, Jeff. I'll be praying for you."

SLATER, leaving town, set out across the open range. Before dawn he came to a low hillock where the slope was broken by a jumble of rocks. Working his way among them, he found concealment and shelter. He knew the country from boyhod. He remembered other spots which would serve well, without being suspected and watched as much as a cave.

Since the dictionary man left no tracks, it would be a waste of time trying to cut his trail. His victims, however, could be watched. So, by stalking the men probably marked for death, Slater had a chance of tangling with the imported killer. Finally, by living as the man-hunter lived, Slater figured that bit by bit he would get a hunch as to where the man stayed when not on the prowl.

By putting himself in the dictionary man's place, Slater would in the end grow easily and naturally into the ways of the game, and become of one mind with the murdering varmint.

"Come to think of it," he told himself, "this is pretty much like what I told Syria about sleeping in the old house until it sort of grew into my mind where the old man had cached the gold. Only maybe there isn't any. He might've been trying to be mysterious and making a show around Syria's mother."

But gold-seeking now seemed a trivial thing in comparison to the stakes for which he was playing.

He began to think of the man-hunter and picture him as the smooth-moving Mr. Crane. Bad business, taking things for granted. Let the man build up out of his own doings. Yet Crane persistently cropped up, however well Slater realized that any stranger with whom Gordon had been talking might well have been courteous enough to tell Gordon that the trial was under way.

"Two acquitted rustlers still on the loose. Dale Martin. Slim Jarvis. Might be others on the blacklist. Crane—call him Crane for short—somehow knew Allison and Blake aimed to come up that rocky draw. If he'd been laying for me, he could have pegged me before they showed up. I might've been bait for them, but sure as gospel, they were not bait for me. Martin. Jarvis. Allison. Eenie-meenie-miney mo."

He pictured the ranges over which he had ridden since boyhood. In this mental panorama he planted a tombstone here, another there, and still another in the pass. He dated each imaginary marker. Like a four-legged varmint, Crane would prowl in a circuit, rather than striking always from one lair. When a man was shot down, his neighbors went on the alert; whereas those who had most cause for alarm were the prospective victims who lived some miles away.

Then there was another way of building a pattern: first victim, one of the quartet acquitted in the face of all evidence for conviction; second, a man widely suspected but never arrested; third, another of those acquitted. Number four? Another of those who, though having a bad name, had not been nabbed by the law.

After wavering between both groups, Slater went into hiding on Allison's range. With his binoculars, he noted brands. Allison, barely hanging on by the toenails, couldn't meet a payroll. He had only his fourteen year old son and the late Block Reeder's brother helping him.

Neither he nor his hard-hit neighbor had enough critters to need much more help. If the poor devils could only stick to beefing other peoples' steers for food, it wouldn't be so bad. The old-timers looked the other way when that happened. But not Gordon.

For three days Slater studied the comings and goings of Allison, as though he were out to dry-gulch the man. He failed to note any sign of Crane. Then, plumb out of grub, he made his way back to his father's old house.

Slater had not had a smoke since the ambush in the pass. He could not risk having the scent of tobacco on him. By abstaining, he got his nose honed to such a fine edge that he could pick up the faintest odor of smoke or horseflesh or leather. So, nearing the old home, he smelled his way.

AT THE kitchen door, he crouched to listen to the voice of the building. Out of the vacancy came a feminie scent, the ghost of sachet from wardrobe or bedroom.

"Syria's been here."

Soundlessly, he shaped the words. He had begun to do this from having had no human speech in his ears since he'd last seen her.

He crept to the front.

Someone was there. To say that he heard breathing would not have been true, yet it was a sensing akin to perceiving sound. It encouraged him that he had actually developed a second set of senses for catching impressions too fine for the ordinary five.

Syria, all right. Yet he had his gun ready for action when he said. "It's me."

He didn't lower the gun, or release himself from the shape into which he'd twisted to avoid the shot his voice had courted. He heard a catch of breath, and, "Oh, Jeff! I was dozing."

Hearing that, he abandoned all caution. He forgot hunger and weariness. With both arms full of her, he knew now that he'd never again wonder if the someone in the darkness was Syria, or another woman. Then, "How'd you know I'd be here?"

"I had to wait, just in case. I found it, I found it."

"Where's he hang out? How'd you find out? Sure it's not bait someone gave you to fool me?"

"I meant the gold, your father's."

"Gold," he echoed listlessly. "This work's making me edgy. I've become so much like a lobo from pretending to be one, I've lost a human's interest in cash. Where'd you find it? How much?"

"Under the hearth." She thrust a buckskin poke into his hand. "I didn't count it."

"Where's your horse and rig?"

"I went back to town after the grave decorating. Then came back afoot after dark. The hostler was too sober, if he'd been drinking, I could have counted on his not noticing when I turned in the horse."

He hefted the poke. "Gold, all right." He fumbled with the drawstrings, and fingered a few pieces. "Odd. Not tens, not twenties. Edges wrong, too."

"Oh, good Lord! Not counterfeit."

"Gold is gold. This has the weight."

"Can't you strike a match?"

"From a mile off, I could tell a fellow lit a smoke. Showed up in the window. I'll take a piece for luck. You tote the rest home."

"The woman I board with is an awful snoop while I'm at work."

"I'll dump it in the well. It's not deep. Couple times I went down to fish out a hammer and once a gun the old man dropped in. What's been happening?"

"Quite a few think you're dead, and a lot figure that's a fake to cover up. That you killed Blake in the pass. Oh, and Slim Jarvis was shot by the dictionary man. Found him the morning after you left me

at my window. Do you know what happened?"

"I would play the wrong hunch. Where's the grub, honey?"

"Oh, Jeff, do quit! Let's get out, this gold is our grubstake."

Hunger, and sleeping on rocks, and shivering by night, and gnawing raw bacon made her appeal sorely tempting. But what battered at his resolution most of of all was the woman herself, clinging to him with an urgency he'd never known before. He wondered how he and she had ever been fools enough to be so independent of each other.

What saved him was his mind's map of the region, and the latest of the imaginary tombstones. He disentangled himself from Syria's possessive arms. "I missed once, but this time I'm right. You found me a luck piece. This is it, honey. This is it!"

"I'm bringing you no grub!" she cried. "I won't encourage you to—Good God, Jeff! You might be recognized prowling and be arrested and convicted for all these murders. You'd never have a chance, proving your real intention."

"I'm in so deep now," he retorted, "no matter where I went, I'd turn up on the wanted list. And I belong here. These people once trusted me too far, and I owe them something no court can pay off—so many cents on the dollar. This is how I'm paying my debt."

So saying, he nudged her gently, and she let him edge her to the porch, to go her way. Syria had no more resistance against his resolution.

"I'll bring grub, darling," she promised.

"Don't risk it. Better I come to your window."

When she was gone, he dropped the gold into the well. Then he set out, eating some of the cooked grub as he went. On his mental map, there was now not only the latest victim's tombstone, but also, one inscribed,

CRANE—OR WHOEVER YOU ARE.

CHAPTER FIVE

Blood Gold

ONE of the best places to bushwhack Allison was at the bridge which spanned the narrowest and deepest stretch. There, steep banks made it hard to cross. The more Slater studied Allison's ways, the more important the bridge became. One night he decided to get the feel of the ground under and about it, to figure out where Crane might best lurk. There was a crossing, some miles downgrade, but the old bridge saved a heap of time for Allison and his neighbors.

It was a cantilever of post oaks lashed together with rawhide. The decking was post oaks lashed to unsquared baulks. Slater, creeping along the dry bottom, finally stood under the span, it size it up from beneath and find out if a man could wedge himself among the braces.

Something brushed his face. It was a strip of rawhide, old, hard, permanently moulded to the curve of the baulk it had secured. It had not parted from age or strain.

A knife had slashed it clean. Slater at once changed his mind about exploring the span for nesting possibilities. Allison, about due to drive to Ojo Grande to buy supplies, would be piled down into the creek. There he would be disposed of easily, after which the gunner would have a getaway route. And the steep banks would muffle the shot.

Next morning Slater saw a buckboard coming over the ridge beyond which lay Allison's house. The wagon was making for the bridge. Slater studied the ground, but could not pick one trace of a lurker. Crane without doubt was crouching in an undercut of the bank, unable to see what was happening on the surface; but the bridge crash on which he must be counting made it sure that he was close at hand to drill Allison.

All depended on what nook Crane occupied: maybe Slater could get him before he got Allison; maybe Crane could not be potted before he came from cover to put a dictionary page under Allison's head. Allison, it seemed, might be bait, just as Slater himself had unwittingly served as bait, that afternoon in the pass.

When the wind shifted, so that billowing dust no longer overwhelmed the wagon from the rear, Slater raised his glasses to see if two men rode, or only one. The team was Allison's. A woman wearing sunbonnet and calico dress was driving. A child sat beside her.

Either the kid was sick and heading for the doctor, or else, sure that a woman wouldn't be harmed, Allison was dodging the dangers of the road by sending his wife. And this last minute change of Allison's habits was playing the devil with Crane's plans.

Crane must be in the creek. Not knowing until too late that a woman drove the approaching wagon, he could not warn her away.

Slater cursed wrathfully as he came out from the rocks which had left their marks on him. He raced across the open space to head her off as far from the bridge as he could. This left him a chance that Crane, wondering why his victim had not blundered into the trap, would reveal himself and bring the game to a head. But for him to use that chance, Slater had to move fast to get back to the spot from which he could sight down the creek.

The woman pulled up, far out in the open. She cocked one foot on the brake and waited for him to come up. The kid ducked under the seat. She was tight-mouthed, weatherbeaten, and younger than she looked. Her eyes were red and tired, with deep lines about them. Ranching on a shoestring, washing with home-made lye and tallow soap played hell with a woman's skin.

SHE took him in from moccasins to tattered jeans and beard, that started at his cheekbones.

"What do you want, stranger? I have nothing but a sick child."

"Ma'am, don't cross that bridge. It is fixed to break in half. Your husband has been watched. Those that cut the bridge lashings aimed to catch him helpless."

"Who are you?"

"Fellow that doesn't want to see a woman hurt. Go the long way."

"You a stock detective?"

"Do they worry much about a woman getting hurt accidentally?"

"U. S. marshal?"

"I am not saying what I am."

"I don't know what you'd gain by lying, so I thank you. Come on out, Sandy, it's all right."

Instead of swinging toward the bridge, the woman bore straight on, taking a

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direct course for the creek bend and the distant crossing. Slater did not hurry back to his hideout and the Winchester he had left there. Looking toward the ridge beyond which lay most of Allison's range, he saw buzzards wheeling, gliding, waiting for their meal.

Slater's mind flashed back to that encounter in the pass. The all-seeing scavengers had recognized their good provider. The manhunter, having seen that Allison was not going to town, was sticking to his job. Slater, badly as he now needed his Winchester, could waste no steps. He ran recklessly for the drew which cut into the ridge.

He still had the binoculars hanging from his neck. They bobbed and bounced. No wonder Mrs. Allison had stared. Whether she was confident that her husband was working where he could not be picked off, or whether she had accepted Slater as someone on the trail of the killer, he could not guess. He was ready to drop when he came to the crest from which, far to his right, he saw the swaybacked ranch house.

Quite a piece to the left was a pool in which two scrawny cows, not yet recovered from blizzard and starvation, were bogged deep in the mud.

"Buzzard bait!" Slater snarled as he lay, gasping. "Too weak to shake a hock. He's at the bridge!"

The intervening ground, as far as Slater could see, was flat, and with not enough cover for a snake. A man rode toward the pool. Being far out in the open, he was safe enough. Slater raised the glasses.

It was Mike Allison, slumped in the saddle from weariness, and muddied to the hips from snaking critters from a more distant pool. Slater had a sudden urge to hail Allison, and parley with him, since the woman's talk in town would put everyone on the alert, and perhaps send a posse afield. Tell Allison about the bridge, convince him that he, Slater, was working against the enemy and use Allison, one of the hunted, as an ally.

Before he could risk such a gamble, a rifle blazed, midway between Slater and the cattle man. The muzzle blast kicked up dust, yet Slater could not detect the sniper. All he saw was Allison pitching out of the saddle. His horse, after bolting for a hundred yards or so, slowed down, but continued making for home.

There was still a wisp of dust in the air when a man bounced up from where Slater was certain no one could have been concealed. However, once the man moved, it was clear that he had been visible all the while; that his concealment had come from having stayed utterly motionless. He loped forward, rifle carried at the balance. As he went, he fumbled in his buckskin shirt.

"Reaching for his dictionary," Slater told himself as he came down the slope to close in and level off the odds of rifle against pistol. With long, silent strides, he whittled the gap as the man in buckskin slowed up and finally stopped by his victim, there to thumb a book.

IT WAS Crane, all right. The smooth walk left no doubt. He had spied so thoroughly that, with his mission accomplished, he had no uncertainty or misgiving. Carefully, he tore out a page and put it under Allison's head. He straightened up slowly, and took a deep breath, for the exercise of his skill did impose a strain.

That strain, followed by cessation of vigilance, and moments of relaxation at long last were what gave Slater his chance to come too close for Crane to risk slapping leather. Slater wanted a prisoner, not a corpse—the former would serve him far better in the long run.

"Hoist 'em!" he said, quietly, so as not to startle his man into a desperate play. "And turn around slow."

The man who faced him was indeed

Crane, clean-shaven and barefooted. His features revealed hardly a trace of tension or of dismay.

"I see why you don't leave tracks," Slater went on. "But no matter how tough your feet are, it's a cinch you've got a horse somewhere not awfully far away. Shuck your gun belt."

"What's the idea, Slater? I'm the man who didn't drill you when I could have, that day in the pass."

"You're the man with orders to get Blake, and maybe Allison too. With all the hooraw when you drilled Blake, it might've been a mistake, pulling down on me instead of Allison the second shot. One way or another, you knew they aimed to dry-gulch me, and you didn't shoot me out of the saddle because I was live bait for the others. Now that that's off your chest, shuck that gun belt, and let's get going."

"What're you fixing to do?" Crane asked as he shed his belt.

"I could take you to Allison's and wait for his wife or son. They and the neighbors wouldn't much care who you are, or if you're working for Gordon or for someone else. I wouldn't help them deal with you the way the'd be bound to deal, but I sure wouldn't hinder them."

Slater pocketed the dictionary and followed his prisoner. The quicker he got him out of sight, the better. Despite the calm exterior, Crane could not help but be upset from having been caught flat-footed. He would recover quickly, and by the time Slater could get him to town, whether afoot or on a borrowed horse, Crane would be sufficiently collected to dummy up and trust to legal loopholes to save him.

He would depend on Cyrus Gordon, and would therefore try to win undercover support and assistance by denying that Gordon or his associates had hired him.

The way Slater had things figured, the important target was Gordon. However important it was to nail Crane, the achievement of the moment was only a means toward an end. And he had to use Crane at once, while the man still had his defenses down.

Crane headed for the low bridge at a pace which showed that he was worried about what might follow when Alllison's horse drifted home without a rider. He did not slack up until a cleft in the ridge furnished escape from the exposure of the open country.

Finally he halted at what was left of one of the steers that had perished in the blizzard. The skeleton was held together by considerable patches of hide.

"That's where I aimed to stay hid till dark," Crane said. "I haven't got a horse. Can't depend on the critters. They'll shuck their hobbles and start moseying around right when the sight of a strange animal will give you away. Where's yours?"

"I wasn't taking any chances either."

As one expert to another, Crane nodded his approval. Then he said, "I got moccasins and grub in that bone-rack. What are you fixing to do?" He hunkered down beside the skeleton, as comfortably as though Slater did not have a six-gun drawn and ready to pour it to him. "Whatever we're heading for, we better get going. My feet are tough, but they're good for just so much going bare."

SLATER had already figured that making for the Rafter LH would be a good idea. After turning the prisoner over to Len Hardy, he could get to work and put the screws on Gordon. He could get master and man equally worried from wondering what the other would or would not do.

All he gave Crane was, "We're going where you'll have plenty of time to think on whether you might not get a better break if you came clean and told what kind of a deal you and Gordon had."

"I'm not working for Gordon."

"Don't be a fool. Gordon won't go more than so far to fix up a jail break, if that's what you're counting on. And if he does arrange a jail break, he'd play it safe by making sure you were shot while escaping. And another thing. If I take you to the hoosegow in Ojo Grande, there'll be a necktie party sure, with the sheriff looking the other way. But give me something we can use against Gordon, something that will stick, and your chances will be better."

"What do you want to know?"

How much a head do you get?"

"Five hundred. And damn well worth it! It's hard work."

"Mike Allison wasn't one of those acquitted, but you got him."

"He was on my list."

"Suppose I'd drilled him the day I settled Reeder, and hadn't said a thing—just letting the two be found. I'd've earned you five hundred bucks at that rate."

"No, you wouldn't." Crane winked. "Not unless I'd happened to been handy and put a dictionary page under his head to prove I done the shooting."

"I get it," Slater said, casually. "Gordon's got a list that matches yours, and you collect only if you nail a man on the book. No one else counts."

"That's it."

"Where's he keep the book?"

"We better get going if we ain't hiding out."

"Shucks, don't worry. We can talk awhile. Allison's boy and the neighbor aren't a posse, and I brought your Winchester with an idea of being able to handle small trouble. Might be a neat way of getting us some horses. We're sitting here till you tell me a sure-fire way of getting hold of Gordon's book. Where's he keep it? What's it look like?"

"It's a notebook about so big." He gestured. "He put it into the safe. Look here, I ought to have something on my feet, just in case." As he spoke, he leaned sidewise. "Mind if I reach?"

"Help yourself, you're covered."

Crane twisted until, his back to Slater, he got hold of the small bag of grub and the moccasins that were tied to it. As he straightened up, he seemed busy getting the footgear lose. To say that he fumbled would be wrong. He was handy and smooth and quick, so much so that had he been only a little more deft, he would have fooled Slater entirely.

Slater had him covered. Nevertheless, no man can keep his vigilance from wavering for an instant. For a split second, when the derringer flicked into view—the derringer which Crane must have got from his kit by neat sleight of hand—Slater was caught short.

It had happened. He knew it had happened, yet time had to pass before he could get wrist and trigger finger into action. The next thing Slater clearly sensed was the cough of the derringer, the sting of burning powder, the thump of a slug as it skated along a rib. And the jerk of his own weapon, one-two, as he swayed.

The double impact knocked Crane against the hollow hide and bone-rack. He seemed to bounce. He toppled forward. He clawed, he twitched, and he

— TO OUR READERS —

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slumped, face down. The pair of .45's had shot the heart plumb out of him. But he had come so near making good, that for several minutes, Slater could not quite convince himself that he was alive.

"There goes the star witness," he muttered, and dug into his pocket to finger the lucky piece he had taken from his father's buried hoard. It was a gold doubloon, stamped with the face of someone who had been king of Spain a century or two ago.

"This'll bring luck again," Slater said aloud, and knotted the coin into the tail of Crane's shirt. "This beats dictionary pages for tagging the kill."

CHAPTER SIX

"Till You're Black in the Face!"

THE moment Slater stepped into Gordon's office, he observed that the bookkeeper was not on duty, and that the safe Crane had mentioned was closed. Getting Gordon to open it would take some arranging. To tackle this problem, Slater began by accounting for his disappearance.

He told of how Sam Grayling, the sheriff, had advised him to leave town, and of the animosity of Ben Worley, the deputy. He detailed the fracas in the pass. By then he was sure that he was ready to convince Gordon that he had ended by going on a still hunt to settle Mike Allison, and had met Crane.

"Crane got Allison before I could nail him," Slater concluded. "But hell boiled over and the both of us barely got away. I gave him a lift. He's hid out, safe enough. But he can't move without a horse."

"Well, now," Gordon responded, heartily. "If you need horses, you're very welcome." He dug into his vest pocket for a couple of twenties. "And a bit of cash."

"More to it than that," Slater countered, and produced the dictionary. "Look at the pages torn out, and Crane's list of men to be settled. I'm here to collect his pay for him."

"Pay? What do you mean, pay?"

"You hired him. And if anyone should find him before I can help him get away, you can bet he'll tell them who he was working for. What do you think? Take a good look at my shirt—you'll see I got winged too. No witnesses here. You might as well come clean and quit pretending."

Gordon coughed, fingered his chin. "Whatever happened, you're in a hurry. Sit down, I'll order some horses and grub."

No sooner did the screen slam than Slater pounced for the safe. It was locked. The ticklish work was still ahead. Outside, Gordon called several of his men by name. Slater could make nothing of the exchange which followed, but there was action in the remuda. Whatever else might happen, there'd be a horse at hand.

When Gordon returned, he cocked his foot on the seat of his swivel chair and whacked his knee with the dictionary to punctuate his words. "You mean to look me in the eye and tell me that Crane, that stranger we both saw in Ojo, claims I hired him to clean up rustlers?"

"For $500 a head. Ellis, tried and acquitted. Bushnell, bad name but never arrested. Blake, tried and acquitted. Jarvis, ditto. Now Mike Allison. Each tagged with a dictionary page. None of them marked paid, either."

"You'll do, Slater," Gordon chuckled. "Of course I held out on Crane, or else he'd've gone to some nearby town between killings, got drunk, and talked too loud. No wonder you've made an about face, with people turning against you." He went to the safe and as he spun the dial, he continued, "But I haven't $2500 on hand. Tell him to come back when things are quiet."

He tossed a canvas bag to the desk.

"Count it if you want. The horses are ready, grub and all."

Gordon turned to leave, but Slater detained him. "Can you rustle up some boots? I need them worse than money. Wear nines, but with my feet the way they are, something bigger'd be better. And socks. I pretty nearly had to crawl the last couple miles."

"I'll get a pair of my old ones. I wear tens."

Gordon was barely out of the room when Slater darted for the safe. In one of the pigeonholes was a cloth-bound, hard-cover note book, ledger ruled. It tallied with Crane's description. It was the original owner's journal and cash book, dating to long before Gordon bought the Boxed K. The ink it was written with was old.

But as he ruffled the pages, he found, among the blank ones, a single page with a list of familiar names. After each was the dictionary word which would prove that Crane and no one else had killed the man designated. Slater thrust the book inside his shirt, as company for Crane's derringer, one barrel of which was still loaded.

WHEN Gordon came back with a pair of boots, he said, "Here you are. By the way, where's Crane's horse?"

Slater grimaced ruefully. "We used our legs getting out. He was forted up in a bonerack."

Gordon said, over his shoulder, "Red, you sure Crane rode out?"

A lanky cowpuncher stepped into view. "Seen him myself. Pardner, he sure hoorawed you, setting you afoot."

Gordon frowned. "Doesn't look as if he trusted you."

Slater didn't like the look of things himself. "Do you think I'd've worn my feet to the hocks if there'd been a horse? If he lied and sent me here, figuring I'd not get his money, so he could make a getaway, why to hell with him. And the money too!"

Slater took a step toward the door. A man sang out from the bookkeeper's alcove, "Stay put, mister, and shuck your gun belt."

The man who had come through an inside door to outflank Slater enforced his command with a double-barrelled shotgun. Too late, Slater realized that Crane, figuring that his sleight of hand with a derringer might fail, had done his best to finish his captor with damning misinformation.

Gordon said, "You're staying here till I find out what is what. You two, put him in the granary, nail the door shut, and take turns standing watch. If he hasn't killed Crane, I miss my guess."

In the morning, Gordon and two cowpunchers herded Slater to the sheriff's office. Outside, a crowd was gathering. From the voices which reached in through the window, Slater learned that Mrs. Allison had recognized him. Figuring her husband was doing work so far out in the open that he couldn't be dry-gulched, she had hurried on to Ojo Grande with the news. The posse which had turned out to hunt the prowler as a dangerous suspect had instead found Mike Allison, dead and labelled.

None of this amazed Slater. Gordon had taken him to town instead of to the nearest cottonwood tree. What did open his eyes was that Ben Worley, Sam Grayling's deputy, had become a hero. Leaving the posse, Worley had played a hunch. He had found Crane, had shot it out with him, and had packed him in to claim the thousand dollar reward.

And then Worley came in. He wore new boots and a Stetson. His leather vest and gun belt gleamed with silver conchas. The sheriff looked worried, as though not sure whether he ought to turn in his star at once, or wait to be voted out of office when Worley ran for the job.

Crane was laid out on a door supported by two saw horses. Half the town was now milling around at the office steps. When Grayling sent a deputy to get Mrs. Allison, who was in town arranging for her husband's funeral, Slater said, "Sam, have him locate Syria Palfrey, too."

Then Gordon, the outsider who had become popular for rounding up Crane's supposed accomplice, raised his voice. He faced the door, declaiming to the townsmen.

"There was a reward posted for only one man, and that reward has been well earned by Mr. Worley." He dipped a buckskin poke from his pocket, jiggled it. "Sheriff, I am matching the original reward, provided it be paid to Mike Allison's widow. I must make this recognition of her courage and coolness in pretending she did not recognize the prisoner, and so won her chance to report that he was prowling."

The cheering took quite some time to taper off. Slater felt that his chances were getting slimmer every minute. He was as good as hanged before being tried. Next Gordon produced the dictionary. This needed no oration.

Spectators said, "If the torn-out pages the sheriff's got match up with what's missing in that-there dictionary, it's a cinch no lawyer can pull any funny stuff!"

Getting an unbiased jury would be a stiff chore now.

Finally Slater got in a word. "Sam, since you're trying this case before the judge gets here, mind if I chip in my bit?"

BUT Mrs. Allison came in. Expressionless, bleak of face and eye, she studied him for a moment and said, "That's him." Then, when she got her reward, she said, "Thank you kindly, Mr. Gordon."

More applause.

"All right, Jeff," the sheriff prompted.

"Mrs. Allison is dead right," Slater said. "I warned her of a busted bridge. Like her, I figured her husband being in open country couldn't be picked off." He went into the story of his prowl, and ended by saying, "You all heard Ben Worley's yarn of where and how he shot it out. Ride back and I'll show you blood on the ground near a bone rack, where Crane pulled a derringer from his grub sack and pretty near got me. Only I got him." He patted his shirt where it sagged. "And the derringer to prove my story. Worley's a damn liar and if he'll take off his star, I'll prove it on him."

Audacity won him silence. Slater went on, "Sam, there's no warrant sworn out. Since I wasn't caught in the act of committing a crime, neither citizen nor lawman can lay a hand on me. Gordon hired Crane, and I went out to get Crane by spying on men Crane was likely to be gunning for. When I settled Crane, I

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hustled off to get the deadwood on Gordon before Gordon heard Crane was dead. I fumbled, and here I am."

"Where's your witnesses?" Worley demanded.

Gordon, though no longer beaming, was still at ease.

"Here's the witness," Slater answered, and stepped to the corpse and yanked the shirt. "Sam, you see that knot in the shirt tail? There's a Spanish gold piece in it."

The sheriff untied the knot. "Sure is, sure is."

Worley shouted, "What of it? The two worked together. Of course he'd know Crane packed a lucky piece. If nobody swears out a warrant, I sure as hell will, right now!"

"I'll back you," Gordon declared impressively.

"Swear till you're black in the face. You wait—well, there she is now. Syria!"

"Yes, Jeff?"

"Tell these folks about the Spanish gold you found, and when you found it, and where."

She told them that it had been after the first three killings, and gave all the circumstances leading up to the discovery. "So that settles *that!* And Jeff'll show you the rest of the lot."

Then Slater took over. "Sam, I'm swearing a warrant out for Gordon. He admitted to me he hired Crane. Gordon, how do you like that for a change?"

"To use your own words, swear till you're black in the face!"

He turned toward the door, but Slater detained him. Slater, patting his shirt front, which now bulged conspicuously, said in a soft voice, "Gordon, you took my belt gun. You took the dictionary. But there's something you didn't take." He came a step nearer. "Look!" he commanded, sharply, and reached inside his shirt.

At the abrupt gesture, Gordon jerked from alarm, and his hand snapped to the spring clip holster under his arm. He never got the weapon clear. The two inch barrel of the derringer coughed its one ounce slug and caught Gordon dead center. And then Sam Grayling had his sawed-off shotgun levelled before Gordon's men could think to unlimber their guns.

"Get your boss to a doctor—if it ain't too late!"

Slater said, "What I meant to reach for is this notebook I snitched from Gordon's safe. It's a check list of men to be dry-gulched. Been nice if Gordon'd shot me before I could get it." Then, turning to Ben Worley: "You won't have that star protecting you much longer. Get that reward money back here in an hour."

And when, a few hours later, Slater and Syria returned with the bag of doubloons, the town turned out to hear his next word. Len Hardy was at Slater's elbow as he announced, "This is something I am chipping in to add a couple more cents to the dollars due the depositors. And Ben Worley's chipping in the reward that's rightly mine.

"I'm staying here. Len Hardy's staking me to buy my old man's spread. There's going to be another bank in Ojo Grande. You'll always have blizzards, and you'll always have banks to contend with. You can have an outsider like Gordon, or you can have someone that really belongs here."

When the crowd finally scattered, the sheriff asked, "Jeff, the way you reached for that book, you aimed to scare him into pulling a gun—don't tell me you didn't!"

Slater grinned. "Well, I'd played hell *proving* a case against him, so I used his ways. Syria, you go cook up forty dollars worth of ham and eggs while I get cleaned up, and Len and I have a drink."

THE END

Even now his own tracks were slowly filling with hard-packed sleet!

Old Lawmen Never Díe!

By ROD PATTERSON

SHERIFF FERDINAND SCOBEE came in rubbing his hands and snorting with the pleasure of a good night's sleep and a clear conscience. He entered the warm kitchen, a rawboned old man who wore his white hair frontier style fringed out over his ears and curling up

Old age may chill your blood to ice-water, shrivel up your legs and arms, but—swore Sheriff Ferd Scobee—in a stacked-deck showdown with a killer, it sure as hell wouldn't change the color of your guts!

over his coat collar out onto his coat.

He came in sniffing the smell of fried ham and spuds and steaming coffee. He didn't see the reticence in his daughter's eyes that were the same clear blue as his own, or notice the gravity of her nod as he boomed gruffly: "Fine, snappy mornin', Nora."

It was not a fine morning. It was nasty and cold and bitter-winded. The storm had begun the day before with a ferocious rain that had changed to snow and sleet that stung like salt in an open cut.

It was a bad morning but the sheriff said it was fine and Nora nodded agreement because, for all her twenty-nine years, she had nodded agreement to what the efficient, growling, headstrong old man said.

Nora Peene was a pretty woman, dark of hair and fair of skin, who did not look over twenty-one or -two. The Scobees hardly ever looked their age. Old Ferd had broken all the family records for sheer durability and physical stamina. At seventy-three his spine was as straight as a tight-pulled rope and his shoulders were scarcely bowed. He could tuck away more vittles than most men he knew who were half his age.

The sheriff had that complete self-assurance found in men in their twenties, a belief in his own intrinsic worth that his friends and associates sometimes found annoying—notably Anson Biswell, Mayor of Pinnacle, the seat of Moonstone County. Anson was turning sixty-five and already he was fading and withering and growing dour.

Ferd Scobee had been sheriff of the county more years than anybody cared to realize or talk about. Elections—at least as far as the sheriff's office was concerned—were mere formal gestures, like comments about the weather or the price of beef. Ferd was as permanent as the brick façade of the court house. He was as solid as pie for breakfast, as natural as hocks on a horse. He would never go.

Ferd called most of the natives of Pinnacle by their first names. Only one man did he honor by the term "Mister." That was Riley Peene, his son-in-law. Riley had been Ferd's chief deputy for eight years. He was a good chief deputy but Ferd never committed the strategic error of saying so. He called Riley by the stiff-necked title not because of any lack of affection but for the simple reason that most people seemed to have an inclination to call a chief deputy "Sheriff."

Ferd wanted it known that, as long as he lived, he and no other would claim the right to that title. It was more than pride. It was a state of mind that had grown on him like his hide.

"Two eggs, father?" Nora asked from the stove.

"Three," Ferd boomed from the red-clothed table. He always took three eggs for breakfast and Nora knew it. Nevertheless she made it a practice to ask him at least three days a week because she knew it pleased him to correct her vigorously, like a man whose strength is questioned.

He pulled out his bandanna and blew his red nose a thunderous blast. "Feel like a yearlin' this mornin'. Hungry as a chaw-eared bobcat."

NORA brought him his platter and mug. She was pale this morning and there was a cloud of trouble in her eyes the sheriff had not seen as yet. "It's twenty below," she told him. "I just looked."

"Healthy weather," the sheriff mumbled around his first mouthful. "Wyomin' weather." He beetled his shaggy brows toward the hallway door. "Ain't Riley up yet?"

Nora shook her head and returned to the stove. "He didn't get in till after three this morning. Those outlaws you sent him out to . . ." She let the sentence go down to silence, not bothering to finish it.

"Those outlaws" were the Metcalf

Brothers—Augie, Sam and Dill. There had been four of them two years ago when the gang had broken out of the county jail in a ruckus the town still talked about. During the shooting, Riley Peene had killed Orin and the survivors had threatened by the grapevine to salivate Riley when they got around to it.

But nothing had been heard of the Metcalfs until yesterday when they had held up the bank at Crawford Notch, ten miles down county, and had murdered the cashier and escaped with ten thousand dollars in gold and currency.

The sheriff had sent his son-in-law to the scene as soon as the wires had stopped burning. Riley was competent in all emergencies and this was a mighty important one. Talk had been heard in the county that the sheriff's office had been remiss in failing to apprehend the killers. Anson Biswell had repeatedly stated that the jail-break of the outlaws was a blot on the record of Ferd Scobee's forty years.

Ferd had said to his son-in-law: "Go down and bring 'em in, Mr. Peene. We'll put a stop to this coyotin' 'round the rim. Git 'em, son, 'fore they hit for *mañana.*"

Well, Riley had taken two deputies and had horsebacked off into the storm. Now it was the next morning and Riley was still in bed after a failure, and the sheriff wanted to hear the story.

"Eight o'clock," he said in a taunting tone to Nora, "and he ain't up yet. Hell's Bells, the boy can't take it!"

It was meant as a joke but Nora's face showed two bright spots of sudden color. She loved her father deeply but there were times when her patience and sense of fair play were sorely tried, times when she came very close to flaring up and calling him what he was—a slave-driving, intolerant old warhorse who had no mercy and no genuine understanding for the needs and rights of others.

The sheriff went on, bragging amiably enough: "I can still roll out of a saddle at four in the mornin' and roust out again at six and do a day's work by noon."

Nora might have answered, "Yes, but you don't. For eight years you've been sheriff in name only. Riley's done the dirty, dangerous jobs and you've taken the credit." But she didn't speak, only pressed her lips on the words.

Riley would be getting out of bed in a minute. He certainly had not had a good night's sleep and wouldn't be feeling like a chaw-eared bobcat. For a long time now she knew he was getting fed up. He'd spoken his mind only last week when they'd been alone. "Hack Evarts offered me a job as foreman down at the Bar-S. It's a good lay-out, Norrie. Good pay and our own quarters and reg'lar hours."

The sheriff's voice broke in on her thoughts: "Only jokin', o' course. You savvy what I really think of Riley. Hell's Bells, I'll make a good lawman of him yet!"

She might have retorted, "He's run your office better than it's ever been run. And he took the job because you promised him you'd be retiring and he'd stand next in line for your job. But you haven't retired and you don't mean to. You'll be sheriff till you die!"

But again, she didn't utter the words. Not that she was afraid of speaking the truth to him, but because she loved him and knew more about him than he knew about himself. Ferd Scobee feared old age above all things, and so, as he grew older, his fear made him a bellering old tyrant.

Out loud she said, "More coffee?"

THE sheriff nodded. "Maybe you better wake him, Nora. I got to be leavin' in a minute."

She looked at him squarely and said, "Father, Riley's taking the noon stage down to Westland Lake. A friend of his wants to talk to him."

The sheriff scowled. "Wants to talk to

him about what? What's the idea anyway?"

"It's private. He's been putting it off since fall."

The sheriff glanced toward the frosted panes of the kitchen's two windows. "Kind of rough weather for stagin'."

"Good healthy weather," Nora corrected him with a tightening of her lips. "Wyoming weather."

"Just so." The sheriff glanced at her sharply. Then he went back to his ham and eggs, still scowling.

"He'll be back tomorrow," Nora said steadily. "I told him I was sure you could get along without him."

"What d'you mean get along without him?" the sheriff almost choked. He had reddened like an angry gobbler. "Hell's Bells, ain't I always got along without—" He threw down his napkin, glaring. "Look here, Nora, I've run the sheriff's office for forty years practic'ly single-handed. I guess I can still do it."

He swallowed a couple of times and then took his irate gaze away from his daughter's level stare. "Hell's Bells," he mumbled to himself.

"Of course," she answered calmly. "I didn't mean you couldn't. I knew it would be all right with you."

"Why does he pick a time like this?"

"With the storm," she patiently explained, "we thought there'd be less chance of anything coming up."

"What about the Metcalfs?" he barked. "What's to be done about them. I sent Riley down to Crawford Notch and I want a report on what he found."

"You'll get it, father. Here he comes."

"Good morning," Riley Peene greeted them as he came into the kitchen, yawning and stretching. He was a tall man in his thirties, hard-bodied, lean, with gray cool eyes and dark hair. His jaw and cheeks showed a dark stubble of growing beard. He had not shaved in three days. "Still snowin', Norrie?"

"A blizzard," she answered cheerfully. "And this wind at twenty below . . ."

Riley sat down across from his father-in-law and Nora brought his plate and cup. He looked tired. His eyes were bloodshot. His mouth was hard as chiseled metal. His expression was impassive, almost blank.

"Well," he said to the sheriff, "we didn't have much luck. We trailed 'em as far as Cholo Pass by midnight. Had to give up. They've holed up somewheres down in the Potholes. That's bad country and—"

"Mr. Peene," the sheriff sat back and said with heavy scorn. "I never give up. We got to go in there and find them killers."

"When the storm's over," Riley agreed, beginning to eat. "Maybe tomorrow or next day. Right now I wouldn't order any man into the Potholes."

"Riley," Nora broke in swiftly, "I've told father you were taking the day off to go to Westland."

"Huh?" Riley looked up sharply and blinked at his wife. "Oh," he said suddenly, as if comprehending some obscure remark. "Oh, yeah."

THE sheriff frowned painfully to himself and mopped up the last of his eggs from his plate with the half of a hot biscuit. He wished Riley hadn't mentioned the danger of sending men into a place like the Potholes. It made him angry and it made him scared. Years ago he had almost frozen to death down there while trailing a horse thief alone.

"I've called for volunteers to make up a posse," Riley said after a short silence. "They'll be at the court house by now. But I don't want any part of sendin' men out on a day like this. Anson Biswell's been yellin' his head off about not catching the Metcalfs, but I told him to go to hell."

A wave of scarlet flooded over the sheriff's gray, jowled face. His blue eyes

glinted like ice. "That dried-up damned monkey's out to make one out of me!" he said in a strangled voice. "This is what he wants—to see me set on my backside in a warm office while three killers make a getaway! By God, I'll go down there myself if you're afraid."

Riley lifted his eyes and stared at the sheriff. He opened his mouth and then closed it, taking a tight hold on his temper. "Pop," he said slowly, distinctly, "I wish you hadn't said that. You can go on and do as you please, but you'll take the consequences for riskin' men's lives. I've already told Biswell and everybody else I'll have nothin' to do with it."

The sheriff got up and away from the table. He was breathing hard and his face was red but he said no more. He walked to the coat rack behind the kitchen door and got into his mackinaw and boots and muffler. He strapped his shell belt and heavy revolver outside of his coat and left the house without another word.

Riley and Nora heard him floundering through the hip-deep drifts in front of the house. When the sounds of his profanity had been swallowed by the wind, Riley looked at his wife and said, "Why'd you tell him I was goin' down to see Evarts today?"

She met his scrutiny without a blink, a small tight smile playing along her lips. "It's time he realized you're not going to be his slave any longer. You're going to tell Hack you'll take that foreman's job—right after Christmas."

Riley frowned. His eyes were fine eyes, gray and calm. His face, stripped of its lean humor, was a resolute face, weathered and strong. He smiled thinly. "Shucks, Norrie, I couldn't play a trick like this on the old man! He's been good to us both and what I've took from him ain't been so much. We both love him and that's why I been stayin' on."

"You should have been sheriff two years ago," she said angrily, urgently. "If he'd kept his word you would be, and he'd be taking life easy. He's my father, Riley, but you're my husband and I'm sick and tired of seeing you pushed down."

"Take it easy, honey," Riley said, grinning. "All right, I'll go down and see Hack Evarts if it's what you want. But your father thinks I'm afraid of the Metcalfs and I don't cotton none to that."

THE posse had gathered on the open veranda of the court house. They stood at one end of it, hard against the brick wall out of the savage cut of the gale that swept along the snow-banked street. There were twelve men, all bundled to the ears and casting uneasy glances toward the blizzard-shrouded hills south of the town.

It was bad here in Pinnacle but down in the Potholes the storm would be worse. There the wind would be screaming through scrub timber with the fury of a

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million devils. It was a region shunned by man and beast in winter time.

Ten miles deep and four wide, it was hemmed in by black barren mountains. It held deep gorges and raw rocky hogbacks and lost canyons and boulder beds where a man could wander for weeks like a soul consigned to a freezing purgatory.

Now Sheriff Ferd Scobee had arrived at the court house and was walking heavily up and down the veranda, chewing viciously on his dead corncob pipe. He had just sworn the possemen in as special deputies and was waiting for hostlers to bring the horses from the local livery barn.

A little apart from the group stood a small, wizen-faced man with a hatchet jaw and pale cold eyes. Anson Biswell, Mayor of Pinnacle, watched the sheriff, his thin mouth twisted in a slow sardonic smile.

"Well, what're you waitin' for, Ferd?" he demanded in his rustling dry voice. "Summer?"

The sheriff swung hard on the mayor. "Shut up, Anson! I'll run this party without help from you."

Biswell laughed his cackling laugh. "Them Potholes 're bad, Ferd. Man c'd lose his way plumb easy. You'd need a thousand men to spook the Metcalfs outer there."

The sheriff didn't answer although rage drummed at his temples. He stared toward the mountains at the poisonous rack of snow clouds hanging below the timber line.

"Where's your son-in-law?" Biswell demanded in a pleased voice. "You ain't goin' to leave without him, are you, Ferd?" He repeated his humorless laugh. "You ain't as young as you uster be, don't fergit."

The sheriff was shaking inwardly with fury but made his voice come calm and steady as he spoke to the possemen on the veranda. "We'll foller the stage road and turn east at Cholo Pass. Boys, this ain't goin' to be no picnic and we got to stay close together or git lost. I figure the Metcalfs 're holed up south of Totem Rock. Keep your eyes peeled and the safeties off your rifles—and shoot to kill."

Biswell's voice continued its heckling: "Most lost men sorter swing too far east and git theirselves tangled up in them blind canyons. You better let your son-in-law—"

"Here's the hosses," somebody in the party cried. "Let's go!"

The posse went piling into the snow-banked street and Sheriff Scobee followed. He held his Winchester above the crook of his arm and the flap of his holster was unsnapped, revealing the hard black handle of his revolver.

The sheriff led his men southward into the teeth of the storm. It was a five-mile ride to Cholo Pass. The trail was obliterated by snow drifts and the horses slipped off the beaten ruts and a few went floundering. They traveled single file, with the sheriff up front, his head lowered against the beat of the wind and the cut of snow and sleet. He forked a big bay gelding, with his shoulders hunched in his mackinaw, his hands encased in wool-lined gloves and his rifle hanging loosely from the crook of his arm.

Most of the possemen rode that way, loose-hipped in the saddle, slouched, their rifles seeming an integral part of their bodies. Bert Shufelt, one of the sheriff's regular deputies, pulled abreast of the sheriff. He was a rangy young man with black eyes and black hair and a clipped manner of speech.

"You plannin' to take hosses in the Potholes, Sheriff?" he yelled to make himself heard above the roar of the gale.

"No," Ferd snapped. "We'll have to straddle 'em down."

"It'll be a chore," Bert said in a hollering tone. "Liable to lose some men."

The sheriff made no reply. He was puffing from the terrific buffeting of the

wind. He was beyond words, even beyond curses. He ached all over even now, and they hadn't gone three miles. There had been a time ten or fifteen years ago when he could have outridden the whole bunch of them—Riley Peene included.

IN those days he could shoulder a pack and a string of traps, head into the Potholes and cover twenty miles without even stopping to load his pipe or take a breather. Fifteen? It must have been a good twenty years ago. He'd been in his prime in those days.

Hell, he was just as much a man now! He'd just got a bit soft from sitting around his office the last few years since Riley had become his chief deputy. He'd show these people. He'd show Riley. He'd show Anson Biswell.

The snow was like a smothering cold blanket thrown in his face. It blinded him and stopped his lungs. His cheekbones felt numb and stiff. The terrible cold was crawling up his legs like paralysis. It seemed hours before the black towering cliffs of Cholo Pass opened their giant V against the storm. The blizzard screamed through that cleft and the snow was lifted in long swooping sheets and hurled skyward.

He pulled his horse to a halt, and the thin column of riders blunted around him. He neck-reined the bay to get his back to the gale. He could see steam rising off the posse—off man and horse. It must be plenty cold to see steam like that. Nevertheless sweat drenched his backbone under his outer clothing, under his heavy underwear.

He fished out his red bandanna and blew his nose, fumbling with it over his aching face so the men wouldn't notice his gasping breaths. "I guess we better leave the hosses here," he said finally, cupping a hand to his mouth to make himself heard.

"Bert Shufelt, you take half the men and spread out about a hundred yards apart. Keep to the ridges when you can. I'll take the rest a mile farther on and cut east. We orter meet about at Totem Rock. If we don't chouse the Metcalfs out the first time we'll have to start all over farther on. If we have to stay overnight, we'll make camp right here. I've left orders for a pack train to bring in grub and blankets late this afternoon."

Bert Shufelt, dismounting, said, "I don't like this, Sheriff. They'll be able to see us first if we stumble on their hideout."

"We'll keep workin' south," the sheriff said harshly. "I aim to git them killers if it takes a week. And no shootin' less'n you find 'em. If any of you do, fire two quick ones. Then shoot a couple more till we locate you. Savvy?"

The men nodded, dismounting and leading their horses off the trail to the mouth of a deep dry wash sheltered from the wind by the cliff's high walls. The sheriff tied his horse to a jack oak limb and went back to the trail. He sat down on a half-buried log. He could breathe more evenly now but his knees trembled wtih the exertion of moving in the drifts.

Guess I ain't as young as I was, he thought. Dry pellets of snow hissed through the evergreens as heavy as hail. He shivered. The cold was working higher up his legs, spreading up his spine. He got up and put his rifle down and started beating his arms together. The possemen rejoined him and the whole party trudged through the pass, the sheriff leading.

Twenty minutes later the sheriff was slogging down a ravine alone, his rifle held two-handedly, while his eyes strove to penetrate the curtain of the storm. He strained his ears to hear the sounds of the men on his right and on his left, but only heard the hiss of the snow and the howl of the wind.

He cut at right angles from the trail and headed into a thicket of wild plumb not much higher than his head but so

thick he had to shoulder his way through them. The branches kept tangling him up and whipping across his face.

HE thought about Riley Peene. Had the boy gone yellow? In a way he couldn't blame Riley if he had. The Metcalfs had let it be known that they would get the chief deputy some day for killing Orin during the jail-break. A threat hanging over a man's head could break his nerve in time—even the nerve of a good chief deputy like Riley.

Well, he, Ferd Scobee, would find the Metcalfs and settle once and for all that threat—that and the menace the three men held for all of the citizens of Moonstone County.

The ground sloped downward into the Potholes and he came out of the ravine into an open pocket rimmed by spruce and greasewood. The area had been cut over in the past. Logs had been hauled out but the tops lay in great tangled heaps. He was breathing hard again when he reached timber on the yonder side. He wanted to stop and rest, but the knowledge that the men on his right and left would be forging on kept him going.

"Damn the snow," he gasped. They weren't going to leave him behind!

The snow let up for a few moments, and he could see the mist-shrouded hulk of the mountains not far away. The barren summits looking sinister and bleak and uncompromising, a savage black outline against the lead-gray sky. He took his bearings by that range of mountains and pushed on.

It began to snow again, big hard flakes. The mountains drew back into the ruck of the storm and disappeared. He could no longer make out the crests of the ridges around him. His breath was an ache that pulsed all through his body. His legs were like ton weights dragging at his thighs.

All at once he knew there was something wrong about his direction. He was supposed to be skirting Totem Rock, a butte-shaped mass of granite that rose from the north end of the Potholes. Now, as he gauged the time since he had left the group of possemen, he realized that he should have reached the base of Totem Rock on its southwestward side.

There was no indication of the Rock, no fallen stone or talus shards which littered its base on all sides. In spite of the rise and fall of the ground, he was definitely going down a gradual grade.

Panting, dead-beat, he tried to peer through the thick, streaming curtain of snow. He took a few steps in one direction, stopped and stared around him again. Then he moved back to where the snow was churned by his turning boots. He looked all around him, but there was nothing to see. He felt fear growing inside of him.

It was ridiculous, but he was lost. The butte-like Totem Rock should be in front of him at this minute, but it was not. He cupped his hands to his mouth and started to shout, then changed his mind. Gripping the rifle again he went on, faster now.

He stopped short, thinking: I can backtrack. I can follow my own tracks till I get to where I started.

Looking over his shoulder, he picked up his dim tracks in the snow. He whipped around and started to follow them. But after a few staggering strides, the tracks curved back to the churned spot in the snow. The tight knot of fear in his chest grew bigger.

He started to circle, looking for earlier tracks, and he almost missed them in his panic. The snow was falling hard and covering the marks of his boots almost as he stared down at them.

I can't make it! The farther I walk the less track I'll find!

Nevertheless he began to run down what he thought was his trail. The rifle

had grown to weigh a thousand pounds, but he held it to his chest. He stumbled on a hidden rock and fell headlong, striking his head painfully on some sharp object. Blood dripped down his temple, congealing almost at once in the tremendous cold.

GASPING, sweating, he got to his feet and tried to get a grip on himself. He knew instinctively that he had wandered far to the south and was perhaps two miles from his posse who might already be waiting for him at Totem Rock.

I'm lost, he thought. Lost!

In his panic he thought about firing his rifle. Two shots would bring help—providing any of the possemen were close enough to hear them. The idea turned him sick. When they found he had not fired the shots because of locating the outlaws they'd laugh him out of his job, out of Pinnacle, out of the country! If it meant freezing out here he'd never fire that rifle to get help for himself.

The snow was a heavy muffling curtain forever falling before him, no matter where he looked. He didn't know one direction from another. The wind usually blew in from the northeast and the snow usually stuck to the north sides of trees and rocks.

But it didn't work that way all the time. Some of the worst storms came in from all directions at once—here in the Potholes. The hemming mountains made their own air currents. He'd never carried a compass. He'd never needed one in all his seventy-two years in the country.

The storm howled. He started out again. Time became a blank infinity that held no meaning. Once he ran headlong into a spruce and the shock only mildly startled him. His fear had subsided to a kind of dull anguish.

A voice kept saying, "You're an old man. An old man. An old man!" But he didn't even realize it was his own.

He was in a kind of shallow depression finally, a dip in the terrain like a swamp. Tall grass grew man-high along with brush and a few gnarled greasewood trees. Rocks loomed beyond the grass and the brush, huge boulders covered with a sheen of ice and snow.

Then he was down in a drift up to his arm-pits, floundering, choking, gasping for breath. He never remembered getting free and feeling solid ground under his feet, but moments afterward he discovered he had lost his Winchester.

It was a calamity worse than the thought of freezing to death. Sheriff Ferd Scobee had lost his rifle! Even a green deputy wouldn't let a thing like that happen.

Shame filled him and for a moment he forgot his weakness, his gasping breaths, the blood that had frozen on his temple and his cheek. His hands and arms were numb and his legs had no feeling at all. He was growing sleepy.

He climbed to higher ground and was shouldering his weaving way through a thicket of low, snow-covered spruce when suddenly he stopped. It was the first time he had halted voluntarily. He raised his head and stared dully ahead. He was standing on a slight rise and something had penetrated his dazed brain.

It was a sound he had heard. It was the sodden hard bang of a rifle. Hanging unsteadily to his tracks, he listened and stared and waited. The sound came again—from straight ahead. Someone was firing a rifle, not as a signal. Instantly afterward he caught the slam of a third shot.

Suddenly his senses were alert. Then he knew what had stopped him before he had heard the first shot—wood smoke! Now he sniffed the air like a hungry old hound. His pulses began to pound. Like magic his fear evaporated. He started forward, stumbling, then breaking into a limping trot.

His elbow brushed the holster of his revolver belted around his waist outside his mackinaw. His fingers strayed down-

ward and clutched the butt of the gun. He drew the weapon and cocked it, an instinctive movement. for there was little sensation in his fingers.

SUDDENLY his slitted blue eyes spied a twisting, transparent wraith, thicker than the haze of snow. A choking cry started in his throat. He ran faster and stumbled and fell, but got up and ran on again, his breath wheezing agonizingly, steam spurting around his face.

He stopped abruptly. The thought that the Metcalfs were camped only a hundred feet ahead of him and that was the smoke of their fire he saw, turned him rigid in his tracks. Simultaneously rifle-fire jarred against his ear-drums. There were at least five shots and he saw the sullen red flashes of muzzle-flame through the streaming curtain of snow.

He started forward, moving cautiously now, through a dense screen of evergreens that were weighted with snow. He saw the red core of a fire—a big fire—flickering in a hollow beneath a towering lodge-pole pine. He saw moving shapes near the fire—the figures of three men. They were hunched low behind a ledge beyond the fire, and their rifles were flashing again and the reports beat louder against the sheriff's ears.

They were shooting at someone holed up out of his sight, beyond the fire and the ledge, in a stand of black spruce. The sheriff crouched down low, his gun coming up, and breathed carefully until the fierce panting of his chest subsided. Then he stood up, with his eyes on the Metcalfs, and walked toward the fire.

When he came within fifty feet of them, he yelled, "Drop them rifles and reach for the sky!"

The three men sprang up and whipped themselves around toward the sound of the sheriff's voice. They were grizzled, slit-eyed men with streaky, maddened expressions. They stared at him for a long nerve-racking moment without movement.

Then their rifles clattered but did not fall. They came up and three shots blasted at him. He saw the hot fire in the barrels and heard the slugs screech past him into the brush, and he raised his revolver and started shooting. He didn't feel the trigger but he jerked it—once, twice, three times.

One of the Metcalfs fell as if clubbed, but the other two let go again. The sheriff was aware of a large lazy blow against his shoulder, of a burning sensation that gradually turned into hot agony. The bullet spun him in a slow turn, half away from the outlaws, but he fired his fourth shot as he fell, and saw the second Metcalf fade down to the snow.

And as he fell in slow motion, he saw something queer. He got his head around and saw Riley Peene come sliding down the ledge toward the fire, a revolver blazing in his hand. And as he saw the third outlaw tumble on his face, the sheriff had a fading thought: "Riley lied to me. He never took that stage to Westland Lake."

The sheriff didn't remember much of anything after that. He had a vague idea that his son-in-law was carrying him in both arms, as easy as though he were a child, and he didn't mind it at all.

He faintly was aware of new voices finally, of other hands that bore him through the cold with snow falling on his face. Then he didn't know any more because he was in a far place where there was no snow or cold, but only soft, sweet blackness.

Even when the blackness lifted, it didn't lift much, and he only knew that he was flopped head-down over a saddle and the pain in his shoulder and back was very bad. He didn't know how long it was before the jolting of the horse's gait ceased and he was carried into a cottage that looked familiar. It seemed that he had been brought home, and Nora was there,

sobbing softly, and tucking a blanket around him in his own bed.

BLACKNESS returned, deeper this time. He was so deeply asleep that the doctor could open one of his eyelids for a grave close look without even arousing him. And the doctor, with Nora helping, could wash and cauterize his wound without even a flick of the old man's muscles.

And so two people had a late breakfast next morning with a bit of sunlight spearing through the kitchen windows to remind them that the storm was over. They were Riley Peene and his wife.

"I lied to you both," Riley said in a dull voice. "I had to, Norrie. I knew where the Metcalfs were hidin' because—after they broke jail that time—I found where they'd camped down near Crossbone Canyon. I was afraid to go in after 'em. That's the truth. When Pop got his bristles up, I knew I'd have to do it."

Nora was pale but her smile brightened her sweet face and brought a little color of rose to her cheeks. "I knew you weren't going down to Westland," she said softly. "You never agree that quickly to important decisions. Riley, I feel so guilty about —about father. I feel mean and petty and cheap."

"Yeah." Riley wasn't eating. He was just looking absently at his plate, and not seeing it. Seeing, instead, the tall old man charging down on the killers behind their ledge, charging like a fiery old warhorse nobody could ever put in harness or tame.

"He was a sight to see, Norrie. I figured I was goin' to have to give up when he came a-r'arin' out of the storm and took 'em in the rear by surprise. They had me boxed and—"

"He's wonderful," she agreed, her blue eyes shining.

"He might've even saved my life," said Riley. "I got Augie Metcalf just in time as he was throwin' another bullet at him, but Pop gimme my chance first. Norrie, I don't care a damn what it means to me. He goes on bein' sheriff till he's a hundred, if he wants to."

There were tears in Nora Scobee's eyes, but the smile stayed on her lips as she reached across the table and took her husband's weathered hand. "It won't matter much," she said. "We love him and —we'll be together. Always."

"Sure," Riley said, grinning. "That's all I'll ever—"

He stopped, because there was the sound of slippers scuffing down the hallway toward the kitchen, and those slippers belonged to Sheriff Ferdinand Scobee. Riley and Nora stared, open-mouthed.

He came in, snorting with pleasure at a good night's sleep and a clear conscience, although he limped a bit and his

(Continued on page 130)

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The Winchester roared under his hand and the bullet smashed the ground.

ONE-MAN WAR

By CLINT YOUNG

The rugged, rawhide heritage that Old Man Chambers handed down to his two tough sons could weld them into an unbeatable fighting combine, or else destroy that great team—and all it stood for—forever!

ED CHAMBERS heard the muffled shuffle of hoofs on the humus-covered bench back of him, the gentle creak of well-oiled saddle-leather, but he did not turn his head. The rat-tailed piebald he'd picked up leaving Yuma was

picketed on the basin side of the bench, and now it stopped grazing and lifted its head, looking beyond Ed and whickering softly.

A cloud of vapor boiled upward from the Arbuckle's tin that served as a makeshift coffee-pot, and Ed shifted it from the hot coals to a flat slab of shale. The strong fragrance of the coffee whetted his appetite, and he speared a chunk of browned, fat bacon and munched on it while he filled his tin cup. Then still moving slowly he replaced the pot on the flat rock.

From behind him sounded the dull ominous click of a Winchester coming to cock, and a voice ordered thinly, "Let's get a look at you, mister."

Ed turned, the cup of hot coffee cradled in his palms.

Twenty feet back, a horse and rider were facing him, head on. The man's eyes were shadowed by a wide-brimmed Stetson, but Ed felt the close scrutiny, knew that he was being examined carefully.

Well, there was no gun—neither in his waistband nor with his gear piled on the other side of the fire. They'd given him enough money for a broken-down cayuse, a blanket, and the necessary provisions to get him out of Yuma.

Apparently satisfied, the rider kneed the fleet-looking bay closer. He was a short, narrow-shouldered man with hard, greenish eyes that reflected a mild puzzlement now.

"What you doin' on Triangle range, mister?"

"This Triangle?" Ed looked out over the lip of the bench, where the basin fell away in a long sweep of blue-stemmed bunch grass, luxuriant and rank-growing, patches of it burned a deep yellow by the late summer sun. White-faces, singly and in groups, grazed over it slowly, angling toward the flashing ribbon of Artillery Creek in the far distance.

"Last I knew," Ed went on, "Triangle stopped at the creek. This side of it was all part of Sheldon Todd's T-Slash."

"Mister, you just ain't been around. That's Triangle over there and it's Triangle here. And after today, it's damn well goin' to be Triangle clear south to the tip of the basin." The bay lunged suddenly, its high shoulder smacking into Ed, tumbling him backwards.

Hot coffee splashed out of the cup and over the front of his shirt. It ran down his forearms, dripping from his wrists and fingers. He dropped the tin cup in the fire and mopped at his hands and arms with a bandanna handkerchief. The burning anger that had flared in him faded quickly into a gray sullenness and he wondered bleakly if this was what eight years had done to him.

The man on the bay grinned exultantly. "I thought I had you pinned right, friend. That beaten-down look don't come from nowheres but the inside of the Yuma pen. But if Paul Grimm and them two-bit ranchers south of Hubbard think one ex-gunnie's goin' to pull Triangle off of their backs, they're barkin' up the wrong side of the tree."

HE LIFTED the Winchester over the neck of the bay so the muzzle centered on Ed's chest. "Saddle up that nag of yourn and head back the way you come. You'll find Yuma's a lot safer for you than this basin."

Ed had finished with the bandanna and now he moved to return it to his pocket. But his hand clawed out suddenly and fastened on the barrel of the rifle. The Winchester roared under his hand, the bullet smashing into the rocky ground.

The bay spooked and reared and the rider, still clutching the rifle-stock, was jerked out of the saddle.

He hit the ground on all fours, came up desperately, his hands snaking for the six-guns on his hips. Ed's clenched fist drove into his face and his head snapped back with the impact.

Ed grunted and stepped in and the rest of it was short and violent.

The man came to, wiping scalding coffee from his face, spitting the grounds out of his mouth. Ed held both the six-guns, wondering if that beaten-down look was still on his face and knowing it wasn't. He felt a grim satisfaction in what had taken place, almost pleased with this man for giving him a chance to shake off some of the memories of the eight years at Yuma.

He asked, not unfriendly, "What's your name and what you doing with a Triangle horse?"

The man was sitting on the ground now and his shoulders seemed to bend in as if fear was crowding him. He glanced around for the bay which had moved to the back of the bench.

"I'm Mort Yerrall, straw-boss under George Rouse who ramrods it for Craig Chambers." The bay was too far away and his tone became almost a whine. "Look, mister, I just work there, take orders. Rouse and Craig Chambers are behind this land-grabbin'. Sheldon Todd bucked out at the business end of Rouse's six-shooter and they took T-Slash. They took the spreads north of here the same way."

Ed was listening patiently, and Yerrall appeared to draw some courage from it. "Triangle's got the toughest crew ever hit this basin, mister. If Paul Grimm sent for you to buck us, you're just hammerin' together a wooden overcoat for yourself."

"All of 'em as tough as you?" Ed asked drily.

"Listen, friend," Yerrall said with unexpected bravado, "slip me one of them guns and I'll blast your belt-buckle wide open afore you can touch iron." He grinned shrewdly. "Save you the trouble of havin' it done in Hubbard. That town's bulgin' at the seams. George Rouse and Craig Chambers are there and so's the whole of the Triangle crew, exceptin' me and a couple others line-ridin'.

"Paul Grimm and the south-end cowmen are plannin' a gabfest in the court house sometime this afternoon, kind of askin' for a showdown. And I'll tell you right now, you're backin' the wrong play. You side Grimm and you're dead, sure as a muley-cow's got no prodders."

Ed lifted the Colt in his left hand and looped it up in the air. It clattered on the rocks at Yerrall's feet and Yerrall reached for it, then checked himself, viewing Ed with a deep suspicion.

ED SHOVED the other gun in his waistband. "I'm takin' this and that bay of yours and ridin' into Hubbard, Yerrall. Seems like you got on the wrong fork back away. Paul Grimm ain't sent for me nor nobody else did. I happen to be Ed Chambers, Craig's brother. And Triangle don't belong to Craig and never did. Triangle belongs to me."

It was about three in the afternoon when Ed hit into the town, his blue cotton shirt sweat-streaked and clinging to his back from the long ride under the punishing glare of the sun. Hubbard had a long main street with a dozen others going off at right angles, and the court house, the hotel, the bank, and the sheriff's office graced the corners of the main intersection.

He'd wondered about the sheriff, where he stood in this fracas, and now, glancing over at the office, he had his answer. The big front window was boarded over and the door was closed, a green oil-cloth shade drawn down on the inside and a rusted padlock hanging from its hasp.

Ten or eleven cow-ponies wearing half as many assorted brands were racked at the split rails in front of the courthouse, the only two-story building in town. The hotel was cater-corner from it, a low, log structure with rooms along the side-street side and a common bunkhouse in the rear. Beyond the hotel, built against it, was the Empire Saloon.

The tie-racks of the hotel and the Empire were empty. The street was empty. But looking further down, he saw Triangle horses scattered at the rails, the geometric brand burned black on their flanks. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that someone in the bank had caught sight of him, was turning and gesturing, and then two more faces appeared at the barred window.

Ed pushed the bay over to the Empire's rail and slid out of the saddle, knowing of old that this was the place to inquire for Craig. In a way, it was the same pattern repeating itself, and he damned George Rouse without knowing him, damned Mort Yerrall and men of his stripe, and now, for the first time, he damned Craig, too.

The kid owed it to Jane to keep his nose clean. To forget the easy money and his footloose companions, and that dream he'd harbored of being the biggest rancher in the basin, with the town of Hubbard in his vest pocket next to his sack of smoking tobacco.

The thought came to him, then, that Craig wasn't a kid any more. According to Yerrall, he'd built Triangle up to where it was pretty big. Built it up the wrong way, yes, but men like this Rouse had done the killing, and with them run off it would still be possible to pull Craig back in line.

Twenty-nine he must be, and married to Jane for most of the time Ed had been in the prison at Yuma. Jane Gibson had run a dressmaking shop a few stores down on the other side. Ed looked that way and stopped stock-still, his outstretched hand just touching the batwings of the Empire.

Jane's old shop had been newly painted and above the door, white letters standing out against a black background, was the sign, "Jane Gibson, Seamstress."

Ed stopped his fisted hand short of the door, wiped it on his levis, and then entered quietly.

THE Triangle crew were lined up at the bar, and Ed's cold gray eyes read them over for what they were, fair-to-middling cow-hands but top-rate gunslingers, their hips weighted with iron.

Craig was at the near end of the bar, talking earnestly with a thick-set, heavy-featured man, and at the sight of Ed he broke off and his face split in a wide, welcoming grin.

"Ed! You couldn't of come at a better time." He pumped Ed's hand up and down. "Hell, I thought you had two more years."

"Did have," Ed said mildly. "Guess they sort of got sick of seein' me around and kicked me out."

Craig hadn't changed much, he decided. He was taller than Ed and heavier, with a straight nose and a wide, full-lipped mouth that smiled easily. His hands, when he talked, moved with short decisive gestures, and now he grabbed the other man by the arm and propelled the two of them toward a table in the rear.

"George Rouse, ramroddin' for us," he explained on the way. "This is my brother, Ed."

Rouse's cropped hair gave his square face the same shape as his blocky body. His heavy shoulders were thickly muscled and his vest spread open over a deep chest. And like the men at the bar, he wore two guns, the smooth-polished butts jutting out of black leather holsters on his gun belt.

Craig pulled out chairs for them and when they were seated he leaned over and tapped the bare table importantly with a forefinger.

"Triangle's spread out since you been gone, Ed," he said importantly. "And it's goin' to spread out some more today. Paul Grimm and them lousy sons that shipped you off to Yuma are over in the court house now. All except Sheldon Todd. Todd took the big jump about a year back."

"So I heard." Ed dropped his second-hand Stetson on the floor. His dark hair was damp with perspiration and he pushed it back from his forehead, noting the sudden curiosity on Craig's handsome face. "I bumped into a gent name of Mort Yerrall, ridin' in across Todd's old T-slash—comin' hell-for-election."

"Yerrall give you any trouble?" George Rouse's voice came from deep in his chest. He was sitting back in his chair, openly studying Ed's face, his wide, stub-fingered hands pushing against the edge of the table.

"Some," Ed admitted. He met Rouse's glance squarely, and he saw that now was the time to begin pressing. For there was nothing in the big man's manner to indicate that he was ramrodding Triangle for pay, that these two men, Craig and Ed Chambers, were the big augurs of the spread and he was a hired hand, under their orders.

Ed went on, off-handedly. "So I packed him off to Triangle with my gear and rode that high-steppin' bay he was forkin' into Hubbard."

Craig Chambers grinned again at that and smacked the table-top with the flat of his hand. "Hear that, George? That's my brother. I thought you told me Mort Yerrall was chain-lightnin' with them guns of his?"

Triangle's ramrod was silent for a moment, then said softly, "Pull down on him from behind, Ed?"

Ed shrugged. "Wasn't even packin' a gun, Rouse. This belly-gun I'm wearin' is Mort's."

Rouse's thick eyebrows puckered in a slight frown and he looked down at his hands. Ed turned to Craig.

"What's that sign out there, Craig? What's doin' with you and Jane?"

A CHAIR squeaked as Craig pulled it around and straddled it, his arm folded on the back. He made a sort of helpless gesture with one hand and said, "Things just didn't seem to work out between us, Ed. We tried it for a while but never hit it off."

He hesitated, then said quickly, "Jane packed up, went down to Phoenix for a while, and when she came back she opened the dressmakin' place again." He added lightly, "We couldn't see eye to eye on some things."

Ed jerked his thumb at Rouse. "Things like this gent here?"

George Rouse stiffened in the chair. He leaned forward and put both arms on the table, his head cocked at a threatening angle. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

"I guess what I mean," Ed said flatly, "is that you're gettin' your walkin' papers. You and these short-trigger hombres you call a crew. As of now."

"Hold on, Ed." Craig's face had paled under his deep tan, and his tone was hostile. "Triangle was nothin' but a cocklebur outfit when you left it. George Rouse, Mort Yerrall, and the rest of them spread it out to what it is today.

"Right now, Paul Grimm and the other cap-and-ballers from south of here are over in the court house, fixin' to throw a loop on us. Only, when they walk out of there, we'll be waitin'. And when the gun-talk's over, this basin'll be Triangle and Triangle will be the basin!"

If he expected a reaction from Ed, he got none. Craig spread his hands in a gesture of finality. "Don't come back here after eight years, Ed, and expect to give orders."

"You're forgettin' somethin', Craig," Ed murmured. "Nothin' you've done could've changed the fact that Triangle belongs to me. What burnt powder bought you, I can give back."

"Like hell you can!" Rouse's big hand slapped toward his gun.

Craig Chambers tilted his chair forward sharply, clapping his hand down on Rouse's wrist. "Jump, Ed, it's on a pivot!"

The ramrod laughed shortly and knocked Craig's hand away, bringing his gun-hand up on the table, empty.

Ed hadn't moved.

Rouse said, "Yerrall's bay brought you here, Chambers, and it can take you out. Think it over and come back when we've settled with Grimm and that shirt-tail crowd backin' him."

Ed pushed back his chair and got up. It was clear now, the way it was once before. Craig weak-willed, bent by the wind. Only now Craig had thought he was doing what Ed would want, getting hunk with the men who'd law-courted him into Yuma.

That had been half-pint doings then. Some botched-up cases of brand-blotting, the Triangle iron stamped on mavericks that still had she-cows trailing them, that weren't mavericks at all.

Ed had hog-tied Craig to keep him out of court, and left him at the ranch with old Sleepy Martin to look after him. And Ed had pleaded guilty to his brother's offense and taken the full count, ten years. Because of Jane Gibson.

HE SIGHED softly now, and raked his eyes over the Triangle crew, interested spectators. Men who had to be knocked down to size.

"You got your orders, Rouse. Quick-draw artists ain't got the right kind of voices to sing lullabies to white-faces. Craig will pay you off."

He started toward the batwings, but Craig's voice stopped him. "Hell, Ed, Rouse ain't in this for wages. We're on shares. Why else would he of cut down Todd and—"

"I ain't leavin', friend," Rouse murmured gently.

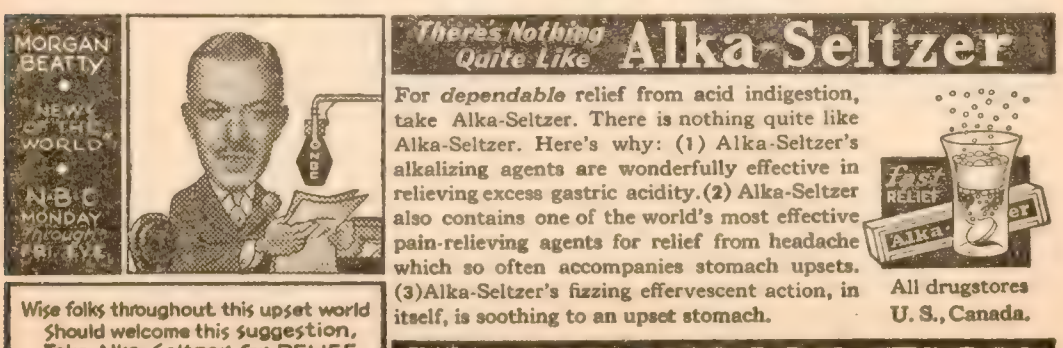
Ed said drily, "We'll see, pardner." He heard the doors swing behind him and Mort Yerrall tramped into the saloon. "I'm ridin' herd on that bay, Yerrall. Don't go makin' far-apart tracks on it."

Mort Yerrall gazed at him in surprise and Ed Chambers pushed past him into the street.

A hot, tense atmosphere hung over the town, with the sun, dipping toward the Carnations in the west, laving Hubbard with its pitiless rays. The mounts of the small ranchers stood droop-eared at the court house rail, tails switching at the swarms of green flies hovering over their flanks.

Ed stepped down into the dusty street, cutting toward the bank corner and the court house across from it. Whatever he said to these ranchers would be suspect, for they, like Craig, expected him to return from Yuma a sour and embittered man, hating them for what they'd done to him, anxious, by any means, to even up the score.

Head bent, he smiled wryly. He'd hoped to find Craig settled down by his marriage to Jane Gibson. Maybe a button or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two running around Triangle, that he could hoist on his knee and whittle a willow-stick whistle for. Gentle a pony for. And after a short stay, amble on to the high country of the Sierra Nevada or swing north to the placer-mining fields around Central City.

It wasn't too late for some of that, anyway. If Paul Grimm would trust him, if the shoestringers would take their cue from him and play along, Rouse, Yerrall and Triangle's gun-sharks would drag it for the tules. All it took was a stubborn, obstinate, uncompromising defiance, and that sand they carried in their craw would filter down into their boots.

There would be one condition—that Grimm would hold nothing against his brother, Craig Chambers. Triangle would revert to size and Craig would run it. And if Ed remembered right, the way Jane Gibson felt about Craig, she would go back with him.

"Say, Ed."

Ed Chambers looked up at the man standing on the walk in front of Jane Gibson's shop. Sleepy Martin had aged more than the eight years since their last meeting. His hair had grayed and thinned out, and his spare frame was even leaner than it had been. Martin lifted a scrawny arm, beckoning, and Ed turned toward him somewhat reluctantly.

"You ain't got back none too soon, Ed," Martin told him sourly. He glanced at the façade of the Empire Saloon, grinned, and spat a brown line of tobacco juice into the dust. "Jane wants to talk with you."

ED HESITATED and then Jane was in the doorway, coming toward him, taking his hand in both of hers. She was a tall girl, slender, with a pale skin lightly dusted with tiny freckles. Her hair, richly auburn, sparkled with red-gold glints in the sunlight.

"Oh, Ed! I thought you'd never—" She broke off, tugging gently at his arm, and Ed followed her into the shop, past the dressmaking dummies and tables littered with bolts of cloth and colorful half-worked remnants. They went on through, into the kitchen at the rear, and no one spoke while Jane filled a cup with coffee from the pot simmering on the wood-range and placed it before him.

"We saw you going into the Empire," she explained, "and I asked Sleepy, here, to stop you when you came out."

Her voice, a low contralto, faintly throaty, warmed something in him that he had tried to kill off eight years ago. He fished for the makin's, rolling the quirly with more care than was necessary so he would not have to look at her.

He said, "Seems like this town's gettin' ready for some gunsmoke palaver this afternoon. I'm on my way to have a talk with Paul Grimm."

"No, Ed, you can't! It's gone too far. You—"

Ed looked up at Jane swiftly, his curiosity aroused by the firmness of her tone, the shadow of concern in it.

"What Jane means," Sleepy Martin put in flatly, "is that Grimm and his bunch are so boogered by this business that one of 'em's li'ble to be spooky enough to cut you down 'fore you get a chance to open your mouth. To them, you goin' in there will be just like Craig or that killer, Rouse. None of 'em knows you went to Yuma 'stead of Craig."

Ed frowned sharply at him, but Jane said softly, "Sleepy's told me about that, Ed. You should have let Craig take what was coming to him. Why didn't you?"

"Craig's my kid brother," Ed said, after a pause.

"Is that all?" Jane persisted.

Ed shrugged, avoiding her eyes. He glanced again at Sleepy. "What's Grimm figurin' on doin'?"

"Sittin' tight," Sleepy sneered. "Wait for it to get dark and then sneak out of town. The whole lot of 'em gathered there

in that court house to make some big talk —and that's all it turned out to be. Once they got word Triangle moved in, they clammed up and got about as jittery as a new-made bridegroom huntin' for the buckboard some joker hid behind the barn. They ain't pullin' together. It's every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost."

Ed pushed the coffee away, a gray distaste in his mouth. "Spunky or no, they're all I got to work with." He got to his feet slowly and said to Jane, "I'm tryin' to get Triangle back for Craig, the way it was when I left it, a clean little spread good enough to make a nice livin' for a man with a family."

Jane hurried to him, putting herself between him and the door. "Please, Ed, for my sake. Let them work it out themselves. You've gone through enough."

Ed's eyebrows raised in surprise. "Why, that's just why I am doin' it, Jane. For your sake, I mean."

That was as far as he would go and he circled her and went out through the shop into the street.

SLEEPY MARTIN followed him, a rifle in the crook of his arm, keeping on the street side of Ed, between him and the Empire. A Triangle hand, lounging on the saloon porch, turned and went in through the batwings.

Offices comprised the whole of the bottom floor of the court house. County Clerk. Land Office. Charle E. Cole, Attorney-at-Law. Ed Chambers and Sleepy Martin strode past them in silence, found the stairway in the rear, and ascended to the second floor courtroom.

Their footsteps echoed hollowly in the stairwell, giving advance notice of their coming; and when they entered the big room the ranchers had drifted to the side, forming a long lane with Paul Grimm and Cole, the lawyer, at the end of it.

Newt McKeon of Box B. Al Lumley, Circle Dot. Baldy Lamprecht from Woodside Flats. Drawn faces, angry and sullen.

Ed made right for Paul Grimm, for Grimm's Question Mark was the largest of these small spreads and by that right he would be the leader.

Grimm was leaning against the mahogany desk that served as a bench for the judge when court was in session. He was a sandy-haired, stocky man and his gray Stetson was pushed to the back of his head.

"I hear you're havin' some trouble with Triangle, Paul."

An angry mutter slid around the sides of the room, but Grimm's quick frown quelled it. "Some," he said meagrely.

"I come up to do somethin' about it."

"As how?"

Ed signaled to Cole, who was wiping his florid face nervously with a handkerchief, and Cole moved around behind the desk. The front of the desk had a rounded lip about three inches high, and Ed leaned over it and shoved the ink-pot and pen in Cole's direction.

"Write this down, Charlie. You can put in all the legal talk later, but right now I want you to get exactly what I say."

The crowd stirred behind him, and Ed glanced over his shoulder and saw they had closed in, forming a half-circle. Sleepy Martin stood directly behind Ed's back, facing the crowd, watchful.

Ed cleared his throat. "I, Ed Chambers, do hereby give my Triangle spread to my sister-in-law, Jane Gibson Chambers. I—"

Charlie Cole put down the pen and rubbed the handkerchief between his palms. "You can't do that, Ed. You see—"

"You heard me, Cole," Ed cut in grimly. "Write it down."

The lawyer wet his lips, hesitated, then took up the pen.

THE scratching of the pen and the steady drone of Ed's voice were the only sounds in the big room. Triangle disclaimed all interest in the outfits south of

Hubbard. The ranchers who suspected some of their cattle were grazing on Triangle range were free to come up and make their cut at any time.

The T-Slash, Sheldon Todd's old spread, would be turned over to his next of kin, if any claimed it. All of the land north of Triangle's old boundaries, the land Craig had prëempted, was to be opened up as free range, the men who'd been driven out free to come back to it.

When Ed finished, finally, Paul Grimm's face was a hard mask, his voice tight. "What dodge is this you and Craig cooked up, Chambers? Damned fine soundin' words, but what do they add up to?"

"They mean just what they say, Paul," Ed told him mildly. "This range war's over."

Newt McKeon moved up out of the crowd. "Try tellin' that to George Rouse and Mort Yerrall," he sneered. "Them two's the ones runnin' Triangle! There ain't goin' to be any peace around here until you, Craig, and them gunslingers are sent high-tailin' it!"

Ed fixed his gaze on McKeon squarely. "That's what you're for, Newt. You're packin' iron. Lamprecht, there, is cradlin' a shotgun." He slid his glance over them rapidly. "Fifteen of us and maybe that many of them."

McKeon's sneer turned sullen and he merged with the ranchers back of him, saying, "I ain't throwin' lead until they raid my Box B. That there paper ain't worth nothin' long as Rouse and Yerrall are alive to get their paws on it and tear it up."

Sleepy Martin looked significantly at Ed and shrugged his lean shoulders. The set of his features told Ed he'd warned him of this, and Ed knew now that no power on earth would move these ranchers. The fear of Triangle, of Rouse, Yerrall and their sixguns, had been beaten into them, and for a moment he almost despised them.

But it was more than fear. he told himself, and not fear of physical harm to themselves at all. These were men with families to think of, the kind of a family Craig would have if he wasn't such a damned fool.

"Sleepy," Ed drawled. "You heard all Cole wrote down. Mosey over to the Empire and tell George Rouse I ain't signed this deposition yet, that I'm fixin' to put my John Henry on it right now."

"Like hell I will! Rouse'll make a sieve out of you."

Ed pointed an inexorable finger at the door. Sleepy Martin scowled, muttered another protest, and then, still grumbling, left.

The small ranchers, including Paul Grimm, faded back to the walls, leaving a long, wide lane from Ed, against the desk, to the open door at the top of the stairs.

Grimm said worriedly, "Better get that sixgun in your fist, Chambers. No draw I ever seen can beat Rouse or Yerrall."

Ed jerked the gun from his waistband, but instead of holding it, he placed it on the desk behind the rounded lip, close to the unsigned paper.

Charlie Cole had risen from the deskchair and gone over to the window where he could look down into the street.

"Jane Gibson," he said, later.

HER light steps tapped on the wooden flooring as she ran through the downstairs hall, up the stairs, and threw herself into the room.

"You don't know what you're doing, Ed," she cried. "Craig's not worth it!" She whirled on the ranchers. "That prison term Ed took! He took that to save his brother! Craig's the one rustled your beef!"

Ed said softly, "Craig's still your husband, Jane."

Jane looked toward the lawyer and Cole raised his hands and dropped them. "I tried, Jane."

"Oh, Ed!" Jane turned back to him.

But Ed Chambers wasn't listening to her. A heavy, steady tramp drifted up to them from below, and he flattened himself against the desk. Paul Grimm came forward silently and took Jane by the arm and drew her to the side.

Craig Chambers entered first, his face haggard, and George Rouse and Mort Yerrall were on his heels.

The two gunmen came forward, ignoring the ranchers, and halted half way down the room. Rouse's shoulders were squared, hands hanging limply at his sides, thick fingers flexing and opening. Mort Yerrall stood in a partial slouch, his greenish eyes flitting from Rouse to Ed Chambers.

Craig Chambers moved forward, then stopped, off to the side. "Don't sign it, Ed," he pleaded. "It's your death warrant!"

"Let him go, Craig," Rouse murmured gently. "There's no place at Triangle for him. Maybe for you, either."

Ed faced them, hearing Jane's sharply indrawn breath, and then he turned and reached for the pen. But his palm closed on the Colt and he swung around, cutting it toward Rouse in a sharp arc.

Rouse's eyes bugged in surprise. He and Yerrall had started their draw, but they were motionless now.

Ed said, "I ought to gut-shoot both you hombres, but I won't. You'll get your chance."

HE BROUGHT his hand close to his body, shoved the gun in his waistband. His fingers loosened, came clear of the Colt.

Without warning, Triangle's ramrod hit iron. His sixgun swivelled on its pivot, belching lead before Ed could recover.

The slug chunked into Chambers' hip, pinning him to the desk, and as he slid painfully to the floor, jerking the gun free, he put the sight on Rouse's huge bulk and triggered.

George Rouse staggered drunkenly, but his six-shooter roared again and wood splinters nicked into Ed's cheek.

Mort Yerrall had crouched and filled his hands, but Craig Chambers threw down on him and Yerrall tipped over and crashed on his shoulder, lifeless, his temple shattered.

Ed fired wildly then, and Rouse grunted and doubled over.

His brother's arm rose and the sixgun slammed down savagely on Rouse's head. The big man lurched wildly, falling, and the echo rocked the room as he hit the floor.

Jane had Ed, then, kneeling beside him, pressing his head against her bosom. Someone had gone to fetch the medico, and the ranchers gathered around them, solemn-faced.

Craig was there. He had thrown away the gun and he stood stiffly, his hands clenched. "I'm no good, Ed," he said bitterly, "and I never was. Jane only married me because she knew you wanted her to. She's been in love with you right along, and neither of us saw it. Well, she's free now and you're a damned fool if you don't take her. That's why she went to Phoenix, for a divorce."

Craig's eyes sought Paul Grimm and found him. "I'm ridin', Paul. Give me ten minutes before you take after me."

Paul Grimm broke the silence. "Ten minutes." He looked at the other ranchers. "How long we givin' him?"

"Hell," McKeon said, "I ain't ridin' in any posse, now or no time. I'm goin' to the Empire for a drink. Got to let them gunslingers that used to work for Triangle know they got a new boss."

Jane Gibson smiled at Ed and then lifted her head to the grinning ranchers.

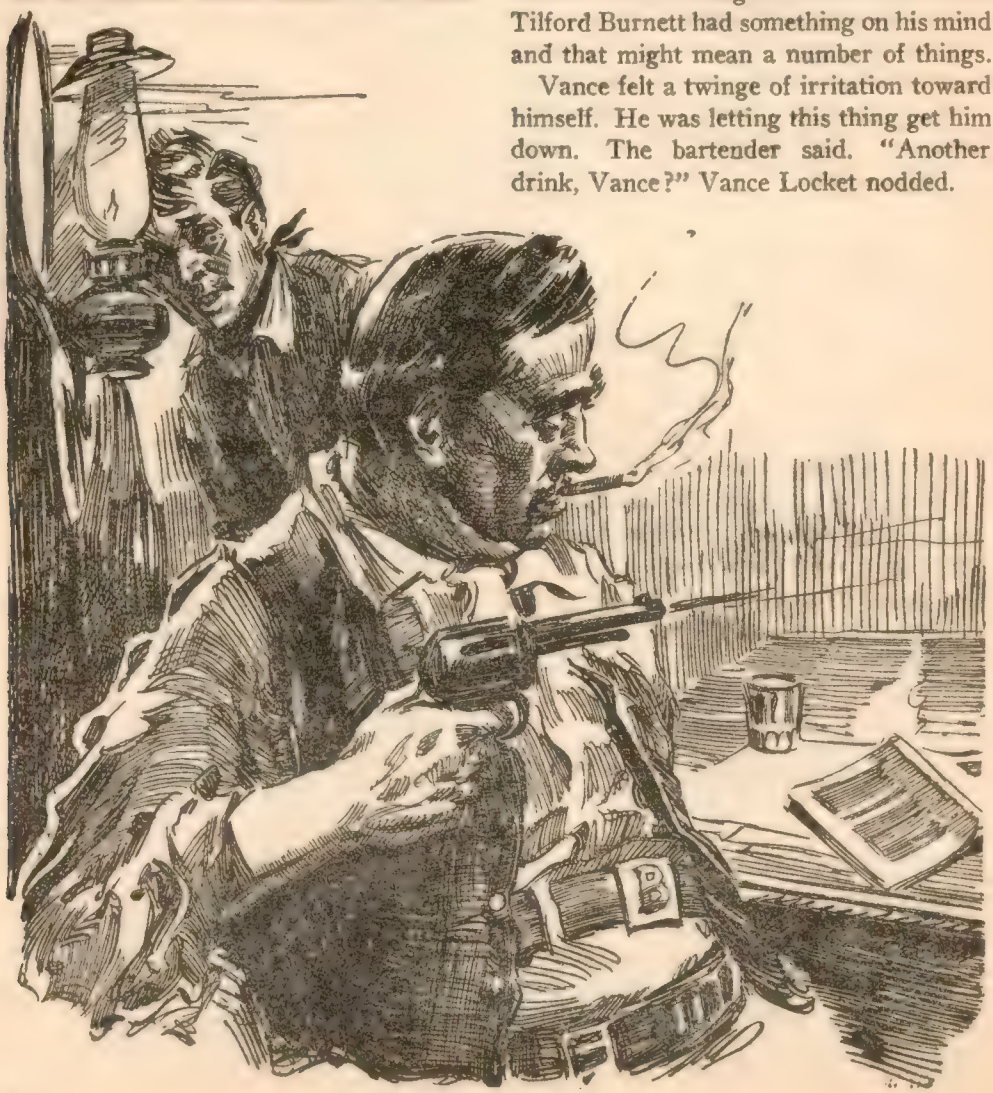
"Hurry that doctor along, will you, boys? I want to get Ed patched up right quick. No man can go limping up the aisle in his condition!"

STEEL TRAIL

Dramatic Frontier Novel

By

THOMAS THOMPSON



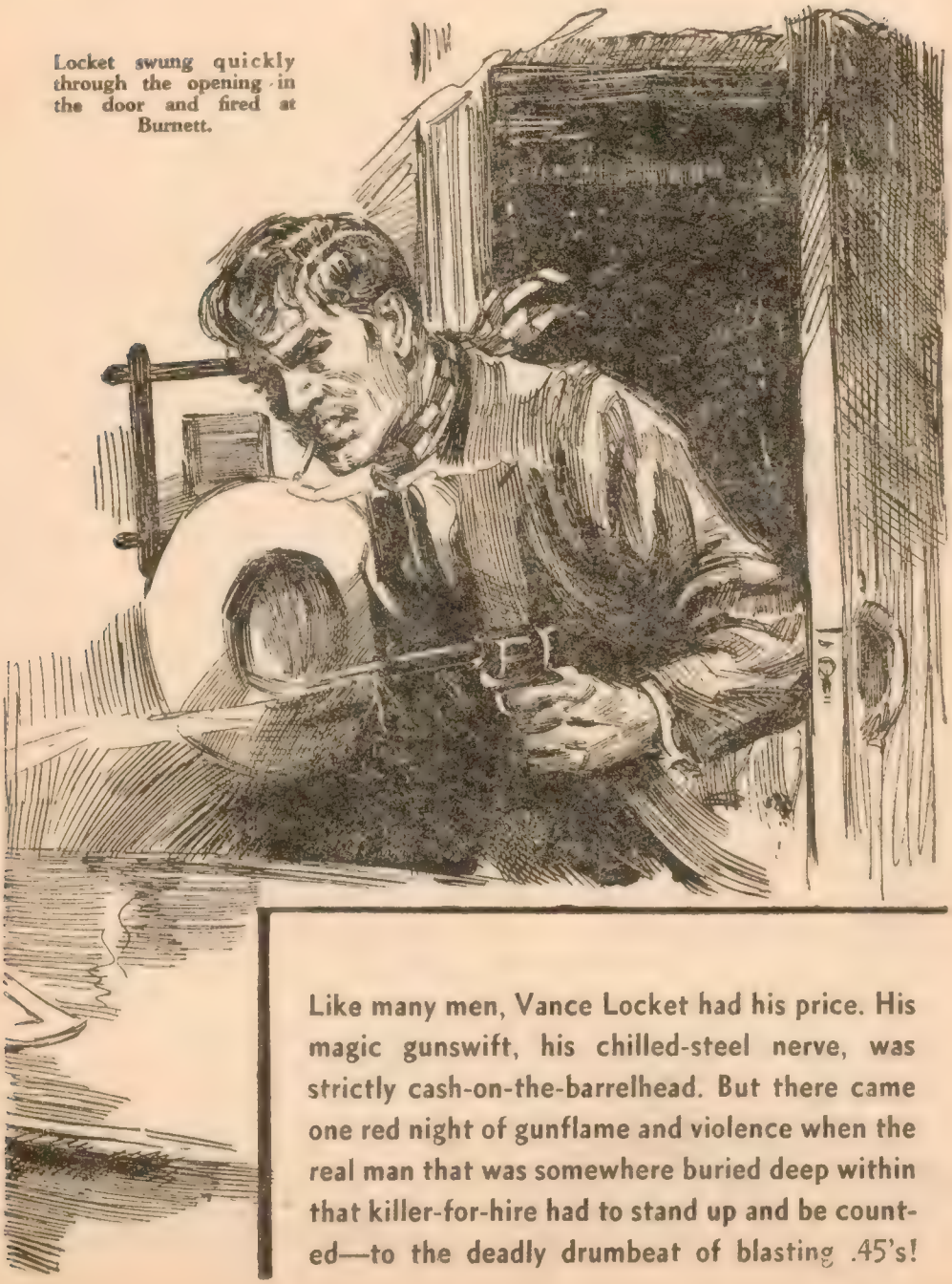
CHAPTER ONE

Pig Meat

VANCE LOCKET was down at the bar when Bugs Walters found him. A tall man in his middle twenties, the Special Investigator for the railroad pursed his full lips and a hint of anticipated trouble shadowed his brown eyes. If Bugs Walters was looking for him it meant that Tilford Burnett had something on his mind and that might mean a number of things.

Vance felt a twinge of irritation toward himself. He was letting this thing get him down. The bartender said. "Another drink, Vance?" Vance Locket nodded.

GUNMAN • • • •



Locket swung quickly through the opening in the door and fired at Burnett.

Like many men, Vance Locket had his price. His magic gunswift, his chilled-steel nerve, was strictly cash-on-the-barrelhead. But there came one red night of gunflame and violence when the real man that was somewhere buried deep within that killer-for-hire had to stand up and be counted—to the deadly drumbeat of blasting .45's!

He stood there and waited, apparently at ease, a handsome man with a cleft in his chin and wavy black hair that spoke unmistakably of much time spent in Millerton's best tonsorial parlor. His clothes were beautifully tailored by a big-name firm in San Francisco. He wore a black gambler's coat and hand-made boots which were perfectly polished and showed from under his dark-striped trousers. His shirt was immaculately white and a black string tie gave a sharp contrast. His teeth were even and there was a faint odor of cologne about him. He looked like a dandy. Even Bugs Walters had better sense than to call him one.

Without appearing to, Vance studied every lumbering movement Bugs Walters made as he worked his way through the crowded saloon. Bugs was a physical giant, a mental pigmy. He towered well over six feet and was as broad as a barn. His face was scarred to the point where it had a continual vacantness about it. His forehead sloped alarmingly and accented his batwing ears.

There were raw patches of flesh where the skin had been recently ripped from his knuckles. Vance saw it and knew what it meant. Tilford Burnett was still rounding up the small fry and handling them in his own way. Perhaps now the Agent had found a way to go after bigger game.

Vance Locket considered Tilford Burnett, the Millerton agent, and Bugs Walters, his muscleman, about on a par mentally. He tolerated them because they worked for the road. To Vance Locket his job with the railroad and the future it could hold were important.

The railroad was big, and if it gobbled up land and water and set its own rates that was only progress. Until two weeks ago no court nor even the guns of disgruntled farmers had been able to stop it. By the same token, until two weeks ago Benson Pollard had been the railroad's top lawyer. Things could change fast.

Too fast, Vance told himself. But a man could always mix a strong dose of women and whiskey and tell himself he was having a hell of a good time. He saw Bugs stop at one of the tables and then he noticed the little blonde entertainer who had been trying to catch his attention. The girl left a paying customer and started across the room toward Vance. Vance frowned and wondered just what he had said to the girl last night.

He ignored the girl, more concerned with Bugs. A few moments before, watching the stairway and the balcony that led along in front of the rooms, he had seen Bugs pack an unconscious and battered man out of one of the rooms and down the back stairs. He knew what it was all about and he felt little pity for the man who had taken the beating, but he did feel a healthy disgust for the way Burnett was handling things.

Having Bugs manhandle the members of a paid jury that had backfired wasn't going to accomplish anything. After Benson Pollard, the railroad attorney, turned against his own client there wasn't a hell of a lot a jury could do. He knew Bugs had worked his way up to the bar, but he ignored the hulking giant who still had a splatter of fresh blood on the front of his shirt. The big man was uneasy.

He said, his voice uncertain, "The boss wants to see you, Vance."

Vance Locket took a tiny sip of whiskey. "Whose boss?"

"My boss wants to see you, Vance."

"I'm easy to find," Vance said.

Bugs shifted his feet uneasily. "He's got a telegram for you."

"Go away," Vance said.

THE little blonde who had been undulating across the floor, stopping at each table, sidled up alongeside Vance. The girl had enormous blue eyes and a petulent mouth. Her low-cut dress exposed her extremely prominent collar bones and the

tendons of her neck. She pouted her painted lips and said, "Where have you been, honey?"

He let his eyes caress her without interest. "Busy and missing you every minute." He couldn't remember her name.

"Remember our date for tonight?"

"I've thought of nothing else."

Another girl's voice, deep, throaty, said, "You're sort of mixed up in your dates, aren't you Vance?"

Vance Locket winced. If he had suspected that Rita was the type who thought she owned a man body and soul after one night, he would have stayed away from her in the first place. He turned and looked at her and tried to smile. She was a tall and willowy girl, dark, half Spanish. Her lips were full and darkly red, her eyes warmly luminous.

She said to the blonde, "This is private property, dearie. You keep your filthy little paws off. Get on back with the sheep herders where you belong."

The little blonde moved quickly and her hand slapped hard across the taller girl's cheek. In less than a second there was a flurry of white arms and legs, a smother of blonde hair and dark hair, clawing nails and kicking feet. The men in the saloon formed a packed circle, cheering lustily, making bets.

Vance slipped away and walked up the stairs. At the top he paused and looked back down at the two harpies scratching themselves to pieces on the cigarette-littered floor of the saloon. If it disgusted him he refused to admit it. To hell with it. If a man couldn't have one thing he could have another.

He turned the knob and went into Tilford Burnett's office. He saw Burnett behind the desk, a new cigar moulding his flabby lips. The complete satisfaction on Burnett's face should have warned him, but it didn't. Vance removed his hat, tossed it on Burnett's desk and said, "All right, Pig Meat, what the hell do you want?"

Burnett was a softly built man with a greasy skin and a boil-pocked neck. He loved authority passionately and actually had little. Never sure of himself, he was usually completely unnerved by a telegram from the home office. Vance had watched the agent time and again fighting to make himself read an order from San Francisco, and he had seen the man, trembling with his own uncertainty, spend hours trying to read into his orders some accusation against himself, some hint that the home office was not satisfied with his work.

There was none of that in him now. He was superbly sure of himself. He lighted the cigar and exhaled luxuriously. "I've got a little job for you, Vance."

"I don't take orders from you, Pig Meat," Vance said. He felt a keen uneasiness, knowing he was somehow being backed into a corner.

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"You do this time," Burnett said. "Unless you want to quit your job." There was a glitter of unadulterated pleasure in his eyes. "That's all right with me too, Locket. Don't forget, there's always Pen Cawley."

There was trouble here—big trouble—and Vance couldn't put his finger on it. According to the *San Francisco Examiner* Pen Cawley was a hired gunman, paid by the railroad. The paper had never proved it, but they were skirting mighty close to the truth. Vance said, "What the hell's on your mind?" Vance lit a cigarette and the smoke was coppery and flat in his mouth.

"Benson Pollard, of course," Burnett said, pressing the tips of his fingers together. "Who else?"

"It's none of my affair," Vance said with a stiff smile.

"Isn't it?" Burnett's voice was much too smug. "He double-crossed the road, didn't he? He cost us ten thousand acres of land and these damn farmers are beginning to get ideas. You read that book called *The Octopus?* Young fellow by the name of Frank Norris wrote it. You been reading what John Yarnell, the new State Senator, has to say?"

"You didn't call me in here to give me a history lesson."

"I've done a good job here," Burnett said smugly. "Those jurymen will think twice before they vote different than I tell them next time."

"I'm getting sick to my stomach," Vance said.

"Don't be so big," Burnett said. "You just work here. If Benson Pollard shows up and starts talking it will be your neck as much as mine. Others, too. That's what I told the head office."

"You're a great big man, Burnett," Vance said. "Now say what you've got to say before I shove that cigar down your throat. I'm sick of looking at your ugly face."

CHAPTER TWO

The Octopus

TILFORD BURNETT took his time about answering. He had waited a long time for this moment. He intended to enjoy it to the hilt. He said finally, "The only thing I can figure is that Pen Cawley must be busy or they would have given the job to him."

Vance Locket rolled a cigarette and let his eyes mirror the disgust he felt for the man across the desk. He licked the paper and said, "Being coy doesn't look good on you."

Burnett pressed the tips of his pudgy fingers together and rocked back in his chair. "Looks like they're not going to fool with Benson Pollard."

Vance had no desire to discuss Benson Pollard or his daughter with anyone, least of all with this greasy little man who liked to pretend he was in the confidence of the big powers in San Francisco. Vance said, "Do you want to talk to me or do you not?"

Burnett was enjoying himself thoroughly. "After all," he said, "I guess it's the only way. Pollard knows too much to be left running around loose. Wonder what will happen to his daughter? You thought that was always pretty nice stuff, didn't you?"

Vance Locket's movement was smooth, unhurried. He lifted himself from the chair and slapped Burnett across the mouth with the back of his hand. The soggy cigar became a splattered mushroom of twisted tobacco and a trickle of blood ran from the corner of Burnett's mouth.

Vance picked up his hat and started to leave. Burnett's voice, too smug, stopped him. "Maybe you're not as big as you think, Locket. You better read this before you go." He pushed the telegram across the desk.

For the next three minutes Burnett sat

there and gleefully watched the color drain from Vance Locket's face. He leaned forward and he couldn't conceal the triumph on his face. "Which is it, Vance? You buying a gun or shall I tell the home office you thought more of a skirt than you did a job? Maybe they'll want to know how much you know."

Vance felt every ounce of self-confidence slipping away. He reached out suddenly and gripped the front of Burnett's shirt. With a quick lift he jerked the agent to his feet. There was a trembling in his hands, a sickness in his stomach. "How much did you have to do with this, Burnett?"

Tilford Burnett was no longer afraid. "I make recommendations," he said. "Who knows more about the Pollards than you do?"

Vance released his grip suddenly and his fist caught Burnett on the point of the chin. Burnett crashed over backwards, spilling the chair, scattering papers from the desk. Vance took the telegram and went back out into the hall. He stood there alone, breathing heavily, reading the telegram over and over.

They couldn't do this to him. He wasn't a hired killer. He remembered the times he had argued the same point with Jean Pollard. He went downstairs, a dozen thoughts spinning in his mind. He would get in touch with San Francisco. He would talk them out of it.

At the bar he ordered a bottle and poured himself a shaky drink. Over the rim of the shot glass he saw his face in the mirror and he knew he was trapped. He could carry out his orders or he could go back to nothing where he had started. Rita, the tall, dark girl, came and stood close to him. There were fingernail scratches on her cheek and her hair was still badly messed.

She swayed against him, rubbing him with her shoulder. He turned suddenly and said, "Get the hell out of here before I slap your silly face." He downed another drink and went outside into the warm, sticky evening.

For the next two hours he walked along the bank of the river, watching the moon play against the riffles that covered the hidden gravel bars, seeing the miniature steamer tied up at the dock, staring at the reflection of the railroad trestle in the placid water of the big eddy. He remembered the country as it had been when he was a kid—a dry, barren land with winter frost that froze the ground six inches deep and the gray day fogs that held the biting cold. In the summer the heat beat down and baked the adobe soil and nothing grew.

He could smell the water now, the damp turned land, and he could see the dark green of cat-tail tulles along the irrigation canals. The railroad had come and changed the land and made it moist and rich. But it had failed to change the people. They still grubbed in the soil and complained in their dirty hovels and seldom made a living from their yard-size plots of land. The people were stupid fools and the railroad was God. A man with brains would see which side of his bread was buttered.

HE HAD no intention of giving up the position he had built for himself. His clothes were good, his room the best in town. He never had to hesitate about ordering the food he wanted and a small balance was growing in his bank account. It was only the beginning; there were bigger things ahead.

But Benson Pollard, the lawyer, had been his friend. They had worked together, side by side, Vance digging up the information that was sometimes needed in a tight trial, Benson Pollard using that information for the best interests of the railroad. It had been a ruthless business at times, but progress was a ruthless thing. Jean had never been able to see that.

There was no saying what one thing had turned Benson Pollard against his

employers. His salary was big and he lived in style. But there had been increasing rumbles of discontent all through the valley. Frank Norris had written his novel; the Hearst paper in San Francisco cried out against the "Octopus" that was choking the life from California.

And the young State Senator by the name of John Yarnell was making speeches that were being listened to. Perhaps Benson Pollard had lost his nerve. Vance Locket knew that wasn't so. Benson Pollard had started to listen to his daughter and to what she called "the voice of the people."

It was midnight before Vance made up his mind. Once he had decided it seemed simple enough. He would find Pollard, for those were his orders and the order had come from a man who expected action. But after he found Pollard he would handle things his own way. Perhaps he could reason with the man, make him see that his place was back with the railroad.

Once he had accomplished that he knew he could straighten things out in the home office at San Francisco. He would say that Pollard had won the confidence of the farmers in this trial and would be even more valuable now. And what was the loss of ten thousand acres when there were still millions at stake? He went back to his room and started to pack. He didn't hear the door open behind him; he reached for his gun when Tilford Burnett spoke to him.

The dim light of the single lamp fell across Burnett's swarthy face, accenting the line of his rounded blue jowls. There was a dark discoloration on Burnett's jaw. The agent said, "Running out?"

"You expect me to find Pollard here?" Vance said.

Burnett couldn't hide the quick uncertainty in his muddy eyes. "You're not going through with it, are you?"

"Why not?"

"Well I thought—"

"Be damn careful what you think, Burnett. I'd like another excuse to smash your face."

"You're gonna push me once too often, Locket."

"That's fine," Vance said. "When I do, you send Bugs around to beat me up, will you?"

Burnett made a blustering attempt to recover his authority. "You keep in close touch with me. The office will want to know."

"The office will know," Vance said. "Go on back to juggling your freight rates, Pig Meat. Do a good job and some day they might let you juggle shipping weights, too."

Burnett's teeth cut through his cigar. His voice had a whispering quality when he spoke. "Damn you, Locket. Someday you'll make a slip, and when you do I'll use it to break you."

"Too bad *you* aren't big enough to be worth breaking, Burnett," Vance said. "I'd report that ten dollars you lifted from the till."

Burnett's voice was trembling so that it was hard for him to speak. "When you do slip remember that you know enough for them to send Pen Cawley after you."

"Would you like that, Pig Meat?"

Tilford Burnett shook his head. His eyes were feverishly bright and a spot of deep red glowed high on his glistening cheeks. "I'd rather have Bugs handle you," he said. "I'll try to arrange it when the time comes."

He turned and left the room and his hatred was like a fetid cloud that stayed in the air after he was gone. Vance Locket packed slowly.

CHAPTER THREE

The San Jose Incident

VANCE LOCKET spent the next two weeks in the dull monotony of routine detective work. The Pollards had covered

their tracks well. The search took him south to Visalia into the heart of a water war that was attracting state-wide attention.

Here, posing as a would-be farmer interested in land, he began to discover the strength of John Yarnell, the crusading State Senator. Here too a farmer who was drinking too much accidentally gave the first scrap of information that indicated the tie-up between this same John Yarnell and Benson Pollard.

"The damn Syndicate has always had the court and the law on its side," the farmer said. "Benson Pollard showed 'em that could be busted up, and John Yarnell knows a good man when he sees one. Maybe things will change now, friend. Maybe they'll change."

"Too bad Pollard and Yarnell can't get together on this thing," Vance said, buying another drink. "With Pollard's legal know-how and the financial backing Yarnell could get from the Grange . . ." He shrugged. "Guess that's expecting too much. Here, why don't you have another drink?"

The farmer swayed against the bar and cocked a bleary eye. "I ain't tellin' all I know," he said. "I ain't free to talk. But if the damn railroad knew what was goin' on right now in San Luis." He downed his drink and stared owlishly at his new-found friend. The next morning Vance Locket prepared to leave for San Luis.

He bought a horse and saddle with readily available Syndicate money. A small ferry took him across Kings River and the first night found him at the edge of the sand and sage that stretched across to Lost Hills.

The heat was unmerciful and he rode for two days without seeing a soul. It gave him a lot of time to think. At night with supper over and the campfire dying to a fragrant glow, he watched the stars hanging as big as buckets, and saw the nearly imperceptible movement of them brought on by his long hours in the saddle. There were other nights to remember—too many nights—some of them pleasant, some of them not. He tried hard to forget Jean Pollard and knew that he never would.

He constantly reassured himself that there was nothing wrong in what he was doing, and in that constant need for reassurance he recognized the weakness of his argument. Hours after the sun was gone and the stars had moved across the sky he lay there in his blankets listening to the small desert sounds, hearing the soft crunching of his horse's teeth against the barley in the feed bag.

And always he arrived at the same conclusion. The railroad had decided to get Benson Pollard and neither he nor anyone was big enough to buck the railroad in such a decision. That being so, it was better that he himself handle the job. He could reason with Pollard and he could reason with the powers in San Francisco. If he didn't find Pollard then it was certain that eventually Pen Cawley would, and Pen Cawley was not a man who would take time to reason.

Vance had known of Pen Cawley for some time. He had met the man once and he had not forgotten it. Thin, with a pock marked face and almost lidless gray eyes, Pen Cawley was a gunman and proud of his calling. It was known widely that he was employed by the railroad. It was never proven.

At times Cawley wore the badge of a Deputy Sheriff. At other times he was straw boss on a work gang. Wherever Pen Cawley appeared, trouble started and ended suddenly.

At first Vance had refused to admit that the railroad was actually hiring a paid assassin; later there was no way to deny it. He had argued the point with Jean Pollard a dozen times and he had never won an argument. He then tried to justify the need for such a man.

A train was dynamited near Tulare. A

posse failed to find the guilty party. Pen Cawley found three. It was later proven that two were innocent, but it was too late to rectify the mistake because Cawley did his job well. Fifty irate farmers built a barricade across the line south of Fresno. The next train through carried Pen Cawley and a hundred armed men. The barricade was removed and freight rates were raised to pay for the delay.

This was big business—the large operation. The results justified the means. A country was being settled, an empire being built. It was always like this—the killing of Indians, the driving of the cattlemen from the plains, the breakup of the Spanish Ranchos.

If a man leaned back on his sentiment he would find himself sitting down while others went on to become not only wealthy but the cornerstones of society and the State itself. Vance Locket had watched it; he had made a study of it. He intended to be up with the big ones when the quiet time came.

HE CROSSED the desert and rode through the blistering canyons of the barren Coast Range and in time he felt the freshness of the sea breeze on his burned face. This was cattle country, tan with the mat of cured grass, lush and green under the sycamores along the dozens of meandering creeks. He came to the slumbering mission town of San Luis Obispo, and inside of an hour he knew he was late. Senator John Yarnell and his companions had finished their work and had gone on to San Jose.

He was wind-burned now and the false puff of good living was gone. He wore the garb of a cowboy, and a gun swung easily in a holster at his hip. He accepted the hospitality of ranchers and he slept one night at a stage stop. The beautiful Salinas Valley was a verdant relief and he came to the town of San Jose one early afternoon. By that evening he had found where John Yarnell, the Senator, lived.

His decision to work through Yarnell had been natural enough. Yarnell didn't know him, and in a thing of this kind that was always a help in itself. By posing as a farmer dispossessed by the railroad or by one of the water syndicates, he could worm his way into the sympathy of the crusading Senator. From that point it should be easy enough to find out where Benson Pollard was hiding. He hadn't planned much beyond that. He sat back now and studied the man he wanted to know.

The Senator was young, powerfully built. He had a square face and sandy hair. He might have been Scandinavian. Newspaper men liked him because he had color and a speech of his always made good copy. More than once he had convinced a man with his fists where he had failed with his elocution.

At the moment he was standing at the end of the bar surrounded by a group of admiring farmers. His voice was strong with his convictions and as was his habit, he was not overlooking a chance to make new friends for his cause.

Vance watched him closely, overlooking no detail of his dress nor his manners. Later he went outside and stood on the sidewalk smoking. He threw the cigarette into the darkness of the street and went back toward his room a block away. There were too many people around at the moment. He would find his chance to become acquainted with John Yarnell a little later.

He nearly collided with the man standing in the shadow of a porch post next door to the hotel. He felt a quick, revolting fear, much as a man feels when he steps unexpectedly close to a rattlesnake. Even before he got a good look, he knew it was Pen Cawley.

Cawley had an unlighted cigarette in the corner of his mouth. He was well-dressed and apparently unarmed. He might have been one of a dozen merchants

or other travelers who rode the trains between here and San Francisco. The shadows hung darkly in the hollows of his sunken cheeks and the light touched his incredibly colorless eyes which never seemed to blink.

He said, "Watch where you're going, friend." He gave no indication that he recognized Vance.

It was more as a salve to his own ego than anything else that Vance stepped a little further into the light where he could force Cawley to recognize him. He pushed his hat back slightly and said, "Out for some air, Pen?"

Pen Cawley spoke without removing the dead cigarette from his thin lips. "I don't ask your business here, Locket, so don't bother about mine. Forget that you saw me." He touched a match to the cigarette, hunched his thin shoulders into his well-cut coat and went down the sidewalk. He seemed to glide along, sliding into the darkness. Vance felt a cold chill along his spine.

He was worried with a dozen thoughts when he went back to his room. Suppose the home office was dissatisfied with the time he had taken and had sent Cawley in on the case? He discarded that idea. He had given them no reason. His own conscience had manufactured the thought.

It became intensely important then that he find Benson Pollard and get this over quickly. He poured water and washed his face and was about to put on his gun belt when he heard the knock on the door.

It was so faint that at first he wasn't sure. He straightened slowly, lifting the gun from its holster as he did. He took a deep breath and said, "Come in."

The door swung open easily and the perspiration formed across Vance Locket's upper lip. He tried to hide the gun behind his back. The girl in the doorway said, "Hello Vance. For a detective you don't do a very good job of covering your own tracks."

Jean Pollard was the last person on earth he had expected to see. It completely unnerved him and he fumbled with words like a fourteen year old schoolboy. "I had no idea you were around. I would have been to see you."

"No doubt," she said, and he caught the sarcasm in her voice. "I saw you twice in town today. It was a simple matter to check the hotel registers. You're still using the same alias I see."

"I was going to San Francisco on business."

"You don't have to lie to me, Vance."

She was a tall girl, intensely beautiful. Her eyes were a deep blue, her hair jet black. Her skin was a cream white—white with a hint of outdoor tan. She was wearing a dark green velvet dress with a single row of velvet-covered buttons that ran from her waist to the white collar at her throat.

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When she moved the folds of the velvet caught the light and accented the perfectly moulded curves of her hips and her breasts. The look she gave Vance held both pity and disgust.

HE HAD never pretended with this girl and he never would. When he had first discovered that he loved her; he told her so, and it was a love that had come with a dramatic suddeness that he had never known with another woman. Because of the way she had once responded to his kisses, he knew that she didn't hate him.

It was the thing he had become that she hated, and yet once they had worked together and planned their life together. She had seen nothing wrong with the huge corporation that supported both her father and her lover. He looked at her now and he was unable to lie.

He said, "I've come for your dad, Jean. But not with a gun. You know better than that."

She said, "So you've finally come to it, have you?"

He ignored the intended insult. "I can work things out for him, Jean. I know the right people."

"We don't need your help," she said.

He was suddenly angry. "If I don't bring him back, someone else will, you know that. Do you think they'll let him go, knowing what he knows? Wouldn't you rather have him with me?" He felt he was defeating his own argument and he fell back on the old defense. "This is crazy, Jean. You make it sound like we're all criminals."

"Do I?" she said. "I didn't realize I had mentioned it."

He tossed his gun on the bed, angry at being caught by his own conscience again. "It's just good business, Jean," he insisted. "Where there's millions of dollars involved, can you blame them for wanting to talk to your dad?"

"They don't want to talk, Vance."

"Jean, listen to me."

"Still trying to fool yourself, aren't you Vance?"

"It's the same outfit your dad worked for, remember that." He was getting angry.

"It's filthy rotten now, and you know it," she said. "Why aren't you man enough to pull out?"

He was on the defense again, just as he always was with her. "You're making a mountain out of a molehill."

"Is killing men a molehill?"

"Have you any proof they have killed anyone?" he said defensively. "Suppose they have used some strong-arm tactics? Who hasn't? It's no child's game, opening up a new country. After it's all over we'll be as respectable as the next, and our kids will look back on us the same way we're looking back on the Forty-Niners. Take a close look at the way some of your own folks got their land and their gold claims."

"I have," she said. "I'm not proud of it."

"Jean, listen to me."

"It's no use, Vance."

He saw the slight trembling at the corners of her mouth, and he knew that she hadn't forgotten the things that had been between them. He said, "You didn't come here to tell me that."

She was near tears now. She said, "We've never pretended with each other, Vance. I won't now. I came here because I wanted to see you. I had to be sure it was all over between us."

He could feel the rapid beating of his pulse. "And now?"

"I'm sure. When I saw you in town I had to know if you had taken the next step up the ladder. I had to know if you were after John Yarnell or after dad. I had to know for sure that I actually hated you."

"You don't hate me, Jean." He started

across the room toward her. She retreated until her back was pressed against the wall. Her chin tilted and her breathing was more rapid. "You don't hate me."

"It's all over, Vance," she said. "I'm marrying John Yarnell. I wanted you to know that."

HE STOPPED and there was a feeling in him that was neither jealousy nor anger. There was no way for him to understand that he might lose her completely, and yet the thought of it frightened him. He said softly, "Do you love him?"

Her head was tilted back defiantly. He could see the soft lines of her throat, the loveliness of her lips. She said, "Would I marry him if I didn't?"

It was a pat answer, without meaning. He went toward her quickly and took her in his arms, roughly. She struggled against him until his lips found hers. At first her mouth was hard and cold with no response, and then gradually her lips melted under his kiss.

She swayed toward him and for those seconds she was completely his again. She turned from his kiss and her head was against his shoulder. She was sobbing. He said, "Answer me now, Jean. Do you love him?"

She tore herself away from him, angry and hurt, ashamed of her weakness. She said, "I respect him. Perhaps that is more important than love."

He shook his head slowly and smiled at her. "Not with you, it isn't, Jean. Not with you nor with me."

She jerked open the door and went outside, and he could hear her running down the hall. He stood there looking at his hands, wanting her more than he had ever wanted anything in his life.

Slowly the old reasoning returned, the same reasoning that had kept them apart so long. It was his fear of poverty, his even greater fear of failure. He had come from nowhere and he had brought with him a burning hatred of a past he wanted to forget. To him the baked earth and the sun that scorched the ambition of a man were tangible things that could only be fought with money and power. There was no middle ground, for the middle was too close to the low.

Back there was a hovel where the flies and dust were thick and a man seldom had enough to fill his belly. Back there was the place where women grew wind-burned and gaunt and their hands became twisted. Asking a woman to share that made a sham of the whole business of love. He went to the bed and picked up his gun and the room was suddenly sticky and hot.

He moved to the window that faced the street and opened it. It was a warm night and the scent of fruit blossoms was heavy in the air. A tantalizingly soft breeze brought a faint odor of the tide flats at the southernmost end of San Francisco bay. He leaned out the window, balancing himself on his hands. He saw Pen Cawley there across the street.

The gunman was leaning against a post deep in the shadows of a porch. He would be practically invisible from the street, especially to a man who came out of a glare of lights. He was directly across from the saloon where Vance had seen John Yarnell buying drinks for the farmers.

And suddenly Vance Locket knew what Pen Cawley was doing in San Jose.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Senator

SENATOR YARNELL was standing at the same spot at the bar where Vance had last seen him. The dozen farmers and fruit growers around him were dividing their interest between his remarks and the free beer he was supplying. Standing just inside the front door, Vance could see over the heads of most

of the men. He had kept close to the buildings on his way down from the hotel. He couldn't be sure whether Pen Cawley had seen him or not.

He shouldered his way through the noise and smoke, got up to the bar and ordered. As he lifted the drink to his lips, he saw John Yarnell watching him. Vance smiled, tilted his glass and said, "To your success, Senator."

There was no expression Vance could read on John Yarnell's face. His eyes met Locket's and he held the gaze. He took a glass from the bar, raising it slowly. And still with no betraying expression he said, "At the polls, you mean?"

The smile never left Vance Locket's lips. He felt an inner warning telling him to be on guard—nothing more. He said, "At the polls, of course."

The farmers, interested in their beer, had not noticed the apparently meaningless exchange. The Senator half turned his head to catch something that was being said to him. He laughed whole-heartedly and was back into the spirit of the occasion, but Vance noticed that he had turned now so that his right hand was free and away from the bar.

Vance poured himself another drink, forcing a steadiness he didn't feel into his hand. He said, "Mind if I join you, Senator? I'm interested in what you have to say."

"There's plenty of room," Yarnell said. "Come along." There was a drawn tightness at either corner of his lips.

Vance moved down the bar, sliding the bottle along with his left hand. "I just came up from Millerton," he said. "We could use some of your ideas down there."

John Yarnell was careful. It seemed improbable that he had recognized Vance, for they had never met before, but there was an annoying reserve in the way the Senator spoke. "Farmer, were you?"

Vance turned toward the back-bar mirror where he could watch the front door, the activity in the saloon. It was like an old habit now and he was surprised to find how naturally he slipped into it. He pushed his hat back off his forehead and rolled himself a cigarette.

Running his tongue along the paper he said, "Had a piece of land below Fresno on the Firebaugh Canal. Bought my water from the Syndicate and my supplies from the Syndicate store. Got so finally they had prices jacked up high enough I couldn't pay my bills."

Vance couldn't tell whether or not Yarnell believed him, but the conversational bait was too much for the crusading Senator to leave alone. He said, "So you let your land go back to the Syndicate and they'll re-sell it to another sucker."

"They say that's the way it works," Vance said. "I've heard some say it's a good thing. Weeds out the ones that haven't got the gumption to make a go of it."

Yarnell took a cigar from his pocket. He lighted a match and when the cigar was glowing he waved the match out in thick smoke. There was an amused smile on his lips now. "It must be pretty hard on a man," he said. The sympathy in his voice was a little overdone. It sounded as if he were ready to click his tongue against his teeth. "You have a wife and children too, I suppose?"

Part of Vance Locket's trade was being able to arrive at a fair estimate of what a man was thinking just by looking at him. He failed here. There was no way of telling whether Yarnell was indulging in a politician's saccharine sympathy or making fun of the story.

Vance said, "I was lucky that way. Just myself to worry about."

"Some are not so lucky," Yarnell said. "I know one who committed suicide over a deal like that. I know another family whose two year old died of malnutrition." It was like an accusation.

Vance said, "There's no excuse for a

man starving in this country. If they starve without land they'd starve with it too."

"It's an interesting observation," the Senator said. "I'll pass it along." He turned his back and to all appearances he had forgotten Vance completely. He was a friendly man, full of life and spirit, and he drew people like a magnet. He called the bartender by name. "One more round for the boys, and I'll have to be leaving."

HE ACCEPTED the thanks, the slaps on the back, the handshakes and the reiterated promises as men winked broadly, tilted their fresh cigars in the corners of their mouths and assured the Senator that there was no doubt about the way they'd vote this fall. Yarnell put on his tall beaver and turned his back to the bar. He hooked his right heel over the rail and rested his elbows on the mahogany. He was a big man and he was impressive.

Without turning his head he said, "You seem pretty interested in that looking glass, Vance Locket. Expecting someone?"

Vance had never had his own name sound so completely foreign. It was as if all the conversation and noise had stopped suddenly, leaving those two words visibly suspended in air for everyone to see. He downed his drink and managed a smile. "If I had known you knew me I could have saved some time." He was acutely embarrassed over the story he had fabricated.

"You gave Jean a picture once," Yarnell said. "She still has it."

Vance shrugged. "As simple as that."

He remembered the picture and he was more at ease. It was as if Yarnell had admitted that Vance still had the upper hand where Jean was concerned. Yarnell said, "She told me you were in town. She was afraid you had come after me. Have you?"

"No." Vance felt the corners of his mouth pull down. "Assassinating senators is a little out of my line. I stick to women and children. Pen Cawley takes care of the political figures. He's outside there now, waiting for you."

John Yarnell had an amazing control of his expressions. A shadow of worry crossed his eyes and was gone. He took the cigar from his lips and smiled. "And you've come to act as my bodyguard, is that it?"

"You could call it that," Vance said.

"It's nice of you, you know," Yarnell said. "You'll see that I'm tucked in well at night, of course?"

Vance Locket's voice was suddenly hard. "Let's quit it, Yarnell. I don't give a damn about you. Jean seems to think you're worth saving."

The smile faded from Yarnell's face. "I've thought about you a lot," he said. "I figured I'd smash your face in if you ever mentioned her."

"You can start now if you want," Vance said. "She was up to the hotel to see me this afternoon."

The white patches were clearly accented on either side of Yarnell's mouth. "You'd stoop to anything to get me into a fight, wouldn't you? Are your trigger men staked out in here?"

"I've got no back-up men, but I've got a gun of my own," Vance said. "There are enough people around that they wouldn't notice if I shoved it against your back. When you leave here, go out the back door."

Yarnell took his elbows off the bar. "Into a gun trap?" He shook his head. "I gave you credit for having more sense, Locket." He turned toward the men who had been drinking with him and waved his hat. He called a loud good night and adjusting his hat on his head he started walking across the saloon, straight toward the front door. His back was fully exposed to Vance.

Vance watched the velvet collar, the padded shoulders, the two fabric-covered buttons at the pinched in waist of the well-cut coat. His mouth was horribly dry. His skin felt cold but he knew that the perspiration was running down his cheeks.

He found his voice. "Senator! Wait a minute!"

Yarnell had stopped at a table and was shaking hands with a cattle man. He didn't turn around but continued his way toward the door. Vance pushed himself from the bar and shoved his way through the crowd. A big farmer shoved back, hard. "Watch where the hell you're going, will yuh?"

Vance mumbled an apology and pushed on. He bumped into a poker table and a half dozen chips spilled to the floor. Three men got to their feet suddenly, pushing back their chairs. The Senator was at the door, turning to wave one last good night. Vance reached him just as he pushed open the door.

He said, "Listen, you damn fool!"

Yarnell stood there in the small patch of darkness in front of the door. A foot in front of him the light from the windows made a brightly illuminate square on the sidewalk.

He turned toward Vance and said, "I haven't been able to keep my personal feelings completely divorced from business, Locket. I've hated you because of Jean as much as for what you stand for, I guess. Sorry if I didn't walk into your little gun trap tonight, but I'm not very good with guns. If you'll take yours off I'll give you a measure of satisfaction."

He started to remove his coat and as he did Vance hit him. At the same time a gun made a mushroom of sound across the street.

Vance Locket half turned and threw himself hard. His shoulder caught the back of the Senator's knees and Yarnell went down. Twisting his gun from its holster, Vance started firing toward the porch post hidden in darkness directly across the street.

Yarnell rolled and his fist caught Vance on the side of the head. Across the street the spit of the gun stabbed twice in quick succession. Splinters ripped from the board sidewalk and there was a sudden wallowing of sound from inside the saloon. Vance swung the barrel of his gun and felt it glance from the side of Yarnell's head.

He jumped on the man then, both knees against the Senator's chest. He fired twice more into the darkness. The saloon was bulging with sound but no one had dared come out on the sidewalk. There was a dead silence in the street and it lasted forever. And then over in the shadows a man moved awkwardly.

Perspiration was running into Locket's eyes. He brushed at them with the back of his hand. The post across the street seemed to separate. He could see that a man was there, holding onto the post with one hand. The outline was dim and blurred and it kept moving slowly back and forth. A gun exploded and for a split second Pen Cawley was clearly outlined by his own muzzle flash. His head sagged to one side and his knees buckled so that his long coat nearly touched the ground.

Vance raised his gun. He took his time. He pulled the trigger and he saw Cawley swing away, pivoting around the post which he still gripped with his left arm. He distinctly heard the thud of the falling body, and then the long silence gave way before the bursting dam of a thousand sounds that poured out of the saloon and overflowed the street.

CHAPTER FIVE

Killer!

PEN CAWLEY is dead. Vance Locket killed him. Those eight words started a march through Vance Locket's brain

and pounded with a hammering regularity. Voices were everywhere, large shouts dying to sudden stillness as men approached the riddled body lying in its own blood on the sidewalk. A dozen buggies rattled down the street and the wheels of a wagon screeched eerily. Horses' hoofs thundered against the well-packed ground and those eight words hammered incessantly in Vance Locket's head.

There was a glare of light that cast cutting shadows into the weathered faces, and eyes became enormous and staring. The City Marshal was there. Five uniformed policemen with bucket-like helmets and shiny buttons on long blue coats. They swung night sticks and strung a rope to form a barricade.

There were questions—endless questions which Vance realized were being directed toward him. The tall form of John Yarnell was there, a smear of blood on the side of his face where Locket's gun barrel had raked his skull. Yarnell said, "Locket was acting as a sort of bodyguard for me. He didn't start it. Pen Cawley was trying to kill me." The quiet of the jail cell seemed a merciful relief.

The jail was across from the city park and the scent of the green leaves and the lawn grass mingled strangely with the stench of disinfectant and drunks and unwashed bodies. They had been gentle with Vance Locket when they locked him up and he realized gradually that he had become a sort of hero.

"Just a technicality," they told him. "You'll be out of here in a day. Anything we can get for you?"

When the sun came through the low morning fog there was a crowd outside the jail and the entire front page of the *San Jose Herald* was devoted to the shooting. Vance read the story and felt the full impact of the lie he was living.

A railroad attorney obtained his release before noon and in the front office of the jail he was met by an army of newspaper men who had taken the night train down from San Francisco. One of them an Irishman by the name of Pat Hogan, a block of a man with a three day beard and a five day load of whiskey, pushed his way to the front and shoved out his square jaw until it was even with the line of his protruding stomach. He swayed on his feet and his brilliantly blue eyes peered from under his shaggy brows.

"To hell with the fancy talk, Locket," he said. "What is this, a private tong war between a couple of hatchet men?"

The attorney stepped neatly in front of his client. "Please, gentlemen. Mr. Locket is tired."

The muscles were tight along Vance's jaw. "Come outside and I'll give you a private interview," he said to the Hearst man.

Hogan laughed. "I'm not sure but what that's the plans you had for Senator Yarnell. Something go wrong, Locket?"

The attorney cleared the room and together with the town marshal they got Vance out a side door. The attorney laid a thin hand on Locket's arm and adjusted his pince-nez glasses. "There have been five telegrams from San Francisco, Mr. Locket. They're very much concerned over what went wong. I'll have to get an answer back."

"You said I was tired," Vance said. "You were right. I don't neet a wet nurse. I'll handle this alone." He jerked his arm away from the attorney's hand, pulled his hat lower on his head and went toward the hotel.

He saw women stop and point to him excitedly and once a man stepped in his way and said, "I was there in the saloon last night." Vance moved the man aside with his shoulder and went on.

Five bosomy women with the mark of a Civic Betterment League about them were waiting in the lobby of the hotel. One of them minced forward with much swishing of skirts, her left hand held like a swan's

neck. "Mr. Locket—" He gritted his teeth and hurried up the stairs.

He fumbled with his key at the door of his room. A voice from inside said, "It's open. Come on in." A cold chill settled between his shoulder blades.

He pushed the door open with his foot. Directly across the room he saw Tilford Burnett waiting for him. Burnett had his inevitable cigar in his puffy blue lips. He had a gun in his hand. At the side of the door Bugs Walters, grinning idiotically, rubbed the knuckles of his left hand into the palm of his right.

Burnett was smiling and his piggish eyes glittered. He said, "You've made a slip, Locket. You've made a good one."

Vance remembered the long struggle upward, the way he had walked over this incompetent hireling and the way he had kept him under control. He could feel the hatred of the man thick in the room. He said, "Put away the pea-shooter, Pig Meat. You might hurt yourself."

Burnett smiled broadly. He shook his head from side to side. "Talk big while you can, Locket." He reached into his coat pocket with his left hand and brought out a sheaf of telegrams. "I told you to keep in touch with me, Locket. There are a lot of men depending on the information I give them. They realize they've been dealing with the wrong man in Millerton now. Shall I read these to you?"

"Quit bulging your muscles, Pig Meat."

But Tilford Burnett wasn't bluffing, and Vance knew it. He had the authority he had always wanted in one of those telegrams. Burnett rocked back in his chair. "I told the office I didn't like the way you were handling your job. They agreed with me and I suggested that Bugs and I check up on you." He nodded his head toward a morning newspaper that was lying on the bed. "Looks like I got here just in time."

"Go on back to your box cars and time tables," Vance said. "I won't be needing a boy here."

BURNETT rolled his head back on his stubby neck. His greasy skin glistened. "The question is, will I be needing you?" he said. "I won't have much trouble finding Benson Pollard now. I'm taking over your job, Locket. Any objections?"

"You keep the hell out of this, Pig Meat."

"What's the matter, Locket?" Burnett said. "Afraid I might get to playing around with that pretty little skirt you been chasing?"

"You dirty rat—" Vance started across the room and he heard Bugs Walters moving up behind him. He turned quickly, his hand dropping toward his gun. He was too late. Walter's huge arm dropped around him and held him like a vise.

He tried to twist free and found it useless as the grip tightened. Walters caught his right arm and forced it up behind his back. Vance gritted his teeth against the pain.

Tilford Burnett carefully laid his own gun on the commode that held the wash pitcher and basin. He came and took Locket's gun, tossed it on the bed and sat back in his chair. He folded his stubby hands over his paunchy middle and sighed deeply.

"I can't understand it," he said. "She must have something pretty special. You had all the women you wanted there in the saloon at Millerton. To me, when you got right down to cases, one was always a lot like another."

Vance kicked back with his right foot and his heel landed solidly against Walters' shin. Walters gave a grunt of surprised pain and twisted Locket's arm higher until it seemed it would tear out of the shoulder socket.

Burnett leaned forward in his chair

and licked his lips. He said, "Bugs, I wouldn't let him get away with that if I was you."

Bugs Walters released his grip. He seemed in no hurry. "I never did like him none," he said. He stepped to one side and stood there, his hands hanging at his side. Vance lashed out with a stinging left fist and Bugs ducked and took the blow on the top of his head.

Vance tried to follow through but his right arm was nearly paralyzed from the punishment it had taken. He heard Bugs Walters laughing, low in his throat. He hit again, knew he had hurt. And then a massive fist crashed into the center of his face.

It was like fighting a senseless machine. Nothing seemed to hurt Walters; nothing could stop him. At times he deliberately exposed his stomach to Vance's fists, and when Vance would rush in Bugs would club him on the back of the neck or above the kidneys.

Blood was running from Locket's nose and mouth and the room was beginning to swim. He kept striking out blindly until he felt Walter's big hand crush into the flesh at the top of his shoulder. He was pushed around, shoved back. His head struck the wall.

Then began the most hopeless beating a man ever took. When Vance could fight back at all, it was to glance an ineffectual fist off a face that had been beaten so many times there were no nerves left. The fixed expression never left Bugs' face. He held Vance with his left hand, pounded with his right. And pounded was the word.

It was like a maul against a wooden wedge, a driver against piling. The blows were measured, slow, slugging. Vance felt himself counting, waiting for the next one, like a man waits for the drip of water. There was water in the room. The room rocked like a boat.

He heard Tilford Burnett say, "Don't kill him, Bugs. Just give him something to remember." The fist landed again and now his head was a melon and it had broken and was splattered against the wall.

When he opened his eyes a doctor was working over him and Jean Pollard was bathing his face. There seemed nothing strange about it at all. There was a ringing in his ears and he couldn't see very well. The doctor forced some pills between his battered lips. He saw that Jean was crying and that was as it should be. She loved him and she was going to marry him and a man named John Yarnell.

And Pen Cawley? He tried to put it all together but it was no use. When he opened his eyes again it was dark except for a low-trimmed lamp in the room. Jean Pollard was still there and this time it didn't make sense. He tried to speak and she put her hand against his mouth. He

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kissed the palm of it. A few hours later full consciousness had returned.

His head ached in a thousand places and his face, he knew, was a mass of raw flesh. His nose was broken and his lips were pulp. His ears felt as if they had been heated in a forge and stretched to ten times their size. His hands were unharmed, and except for a pain in his back, so was the rest of his body. He sat up in bed and saw Jean Pollard and John Yarnell.

He said, "What are you doing here?" It was the first words he had spoken. His voice sounded strange.

Jean came and stood by the bed. She had been crying for a long time. She said, "Dad was killed last night. They shot him in the back of the head. I came here to kill you, Vance. I found you unconscious."

John Yarnell put his arm around Jean's shoulder. "Tell her she has to go, Locket. She's got to have some rest."

"Yes, Jean," he said "You get some rest." He kept thinking of a softly built man with a greasy skin and blue lips and he kept thinking of Benson Pollard and of how Pollard had had the guts to follow his own convictions. He said, "Do you have the gun you brought to kill me with, Jean?"

She reached into a hand bag and took out a medium calibre six-shooter. "Do you know who killed him, Vance?"

"I know," he said. "Leave me the gun and get yourself some rest."

CHAPTER SIX

This Gun for Sale!

HE HAD trouble getting rid of John Yarnell, but the ensuing argument proved to be to his advantage. It cleared his brain and by the time Yarnell left the hotel, Vance was able to walk back and forth without the room spinning around.

He paid his bill and left instructions at the desk that they should sell his horse and turn the money over to Jean Pollard. His head was bandaged so that it was hard for him to put on his hat. When he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror he was not able to recognize his own face at all.

He went down the street, keeping in the shadows, walking with an unfamiliar shuffling gait. His back ached horribly and at times a fit of nausea would seize him. He bought a ticket and caught the train that went down the arid west side of the valley.

He knew that Burnett and Bugs Walters would head back for Millerton where they would have the protection of both guns and the law. There was only one thought in his mind and that was to kill Tilford Burnett.

It was a blistering hot afternoon when the train stopped at the familiar red station on the bank of the San Joaquin. He saw a dozen men he knew and half of them failed to recognize him. He went over to the telegraph operator and called him by name.

"Send this for me, Jim." He dictated: "Pat Hogan, *San Francisco Examiner*. I have just killed Benson Pollard's murderer. Come at once. Ready to tell what I know. Sign it Vance Locket."

He saw the telegraph operator's protruding eyes grow wider, watched the tawny mustache work up and down. "Is anything wrong, Jim?"

The telegraph operator said, "You all right Vance?"

"I'm all right. Just sent it."

The operator said, "I'll send it. You tell Burnett to get a new operator. I'm leaving town."

"All right, Jim."

He walked out of the station and up the glaring street. Now his hand was clutching the six-shooter in his coat pocket. He

came to the saloon and saw Bugs Walters chewing a toothpick, leaning against the wall. Bugs blinked his eyes slowly and let his jaw drop.

"Go tell Burnett I've come for him," Vance said. "Maybe now, maybe an hour from now, maybe a week. Tell him I'm gonna get him."

Bugs Walters raised his arms and his huge hands tightened into fists. Vance Locket tilted the gun in his pocket so that the fabric of his coat pulled tight over the barrel. He said, "I've got a gun here, Bugs. You don't like guns, do you?"

"No," Bugs Walters shook his head. "I don't like guns."

"Go tell Tilford Burnett I'm coming."

Bugs Walters ducked inside the nearby empty saloon, and Vance could hear his big feet clumping across the floor. He went inside and a half dozen men got up from the table and went and stood against the wall. Vance went to the bar and ordered himself a drink. The bartender's hand was shaking when he set out the bottle.

Vance said, "What's the matter? Weren't you expecting me?"

The bartender said, "I had no part of it, Vance. You know that."

"Burnett been talking a lot?" Vance said.

"He thinks he's God now," the bartender said. "I'm neutral, Vance. I don't want no part of one side or the other."

He saw Rita, the girl who had fought over him. She came and stood by him at the bar, putting her foot on the rail, her elbow on the bar, resting her chin in her cupped ham.

She said, "Are you home to stay?"

He felt a little disgust with himself, a little shame. He said, "You're all right, Rita. I'm sorry if I made promises I'll never keep."

"You didn't," she said. "It was just a game. The man who plays hardest is the man who's fighting his heart."

"You're a philosopher, Rita."

"I've been called worse," she said. She put her hand over his, let it linger a moment. Then she turned to go back to a table at the front of the saloon. As she passed him she said, "Pete and Valdez went upstairs just before you came in."

He said, "Thanks Rita." He finished his drink.

THE stairs looked high and vacant and a long ways away. With his hand still in his coat pocket he thumbed back the hammer of the gun. He heard the cylinder click around into place. He started walking slowly toward the stairs, his eyes fixed on the balcony that ran along in front of the rooms. He saw Valdez, a handsome young Mexican with a scar across his cheek.

Valdez pushed himself away from the wall and stood at the head of the stairs. He said, "There's nothing you want up here, Vance Locket."

"You're wrong, Valdez," Vance said. "Get out of my way." He started up the stairs, one step at a time, moving slowly.

Valdez said, "That's far enough."

"Not quite," Vance said. He swung his hand and the coat was out in front of him. He saw Valdez move his feet. Then the hand started toward the holstered gun. Vance fired and the smoke curled up from the fabric of his coat. Valdez put both hands across his chest and started to cough.

He lurched toward the bannister, missed, caromed off. His body rolled down the stairs and stopped at Vance Locket's feet. Still watching the door that led to Tilford Burnett's office, Vance stooped and lifted the .44 from the holster of the dead man.

He cocked the heavier gun, holding it in his left hand and with his right he took the other gun from his pocket. He said, "I've got no quarrel with you, Pete. Throw down your gun."

There was a movement at the far end of the hall. A six-shooter sailed over the bannister, hit the bar top, bounced off and landed on the floor. Vance cocked the gun in his right hand. "The other one too, Pete."

There was a long silence and the heat was oppressive. A voice said, "All right, Vance." Another gun came sliding along the floor of the hall toward the top of the stairs. Pete walked out of the shadows, his hands shoulder high.

"You're smart Pete," Vance said. "Go downstairs."

Pete passed him on the stairs, walking sideways, letting himself down a step at a time, his back pressed against the wall, his hands still shoulder high. Vance went on up the stairs, still walking slowly, his eyes still fixed on the door to Burnett's office.

He stopped at one side of the door, dropped the gun Jean had given him back into his pocket and shifted the .44 to his right hand. He tried the door knob with his left. The door was locked. He pressed the muzzle of the .44 against the latch and pulled the trigger.

The heavy concussion slapped back and forth against the walls of the saloon. He kicked the door hard with his foot. There was a ripping sound and the door opened. Two bullets punctured the flimsy panel as it swung inward. "You wasted them, Pig Meat," Vance said. He flattened himself against the jamb and waited.

Another bullet tore splinters an inch from his face. He visualized every detail of the interior of that room. Then he swung quickly into the opening of the door and fired. He saw his bullet plow across the top of Burnett's desk, saw Burnett jerk away from the impact. Then the agent was on his feet, firing crazily.

Burnett's three shots went wild and he stood there behind the desk, blood streaming down his left arm. He kept pulling the trigger of his small double-action revolver, and the hammer clicked against the empty chambers. Vance walked across the room, his gun cocked, moving steadily, relentlessly on Burnett.

Burnett kept backing up until he was against the wall. His mouth was working crazily and his eyes were staring and round. Vance kept watching those eyes. They seemed to get bigger and bigger until there was nothing else except the stark terror of them.

When Vance was six feet away Burnett threw the gun. It hit Vance on the shoulder but he didn't feel it. He saw Burnett press the back of his hand to his mouth. He screamed once. Vance Locket pulled the trigger.

There was a great gulping, whimpering sound. Vance turned and saw Bugs Walters huddled in the far corner of the room. The broken and scarred face was horrible in its white mask of terror. "Don't shoot me Vance. My God, don't shoot me."

"Get out, Bugs," Vance said softly. "Before I throw you out."

Bugs started edging around the room. "Sure Vance. I'll get out. I'll do anything you want. I'll beat up somebody for you."

"Get out of here fast before I change my mind."

The door closed and the gun slipped out of Vance Locket's nerveless fingers. He sat down and held his face in his hands. He was weak and trembling and violently sick.

PAT HOGAN, the newspaperman, arrived on the morning train. He found Vance in his own room at the hotel. Hogan sat down, blew his nose, then helped himself to a drink from a decanter that was there. He held out a crumpled telegram. "This mean what it says?"

"You can check with the undertaker," Vance said. "Where do you want me to start?"

Pat Hogan scratched his knuckles against the stubble on his jaw. It made a loud, rasping sound. "You're no angel, Locket. You're not doing this because of the milk of human kindness and the brotherhood of man. Before we start anyplace what does it cost my paper to get the big story?"

"A clean slate for Benson Pollard," Vance said.

Pat Hogan scrubbed his teeth with his tongue. "He's got that. He's a martyr. What else?"

"The kind of wedding a girl dreams about when Jean Pollard and Senator Yarnell get married. The biggest wedding this state's seen."

There was a good share of the sentimental Irish in Pat Hogan. It showed now in his blue eyes. "You sure they'll get married?" he said. "You sure it's all set?"

Vance Locket's voice had some of the old snap in it. "We're not talking about that."

"Sounds like a deal then," Hogan said, getting up from his chair. "I brought my secretary along." He went over to the door and opened it. He stood aside and Jean Pollard walked into the room and brushed past him.

She was wearing the green velvet dress and her eyes were bright. She spoke barely above a whisper but Vance heard every word. "I found out a few things about myself too, Vance," she said. "I found out you were right when you said I couldn't marry a man unless I loved him."

Vance got up and stood there. He could find nothing to say. There was a blinding blur in front of his eyes, but he could see her walking across the room toward him. He opened his arms to take her.

Pat Hogan sat down in the chair and sighed deeply. He poured himself a drink from the decanter, downed it, shook his head and made a wry face. He took a flash from his own pocket, uncorked it and drank deeply, then smacked his lips in satisfaction.

He sat there then, his eyes blinking rapidly as he vigorously scratched his upper lip. He said, "No hurry, kids. I got plenty of time."

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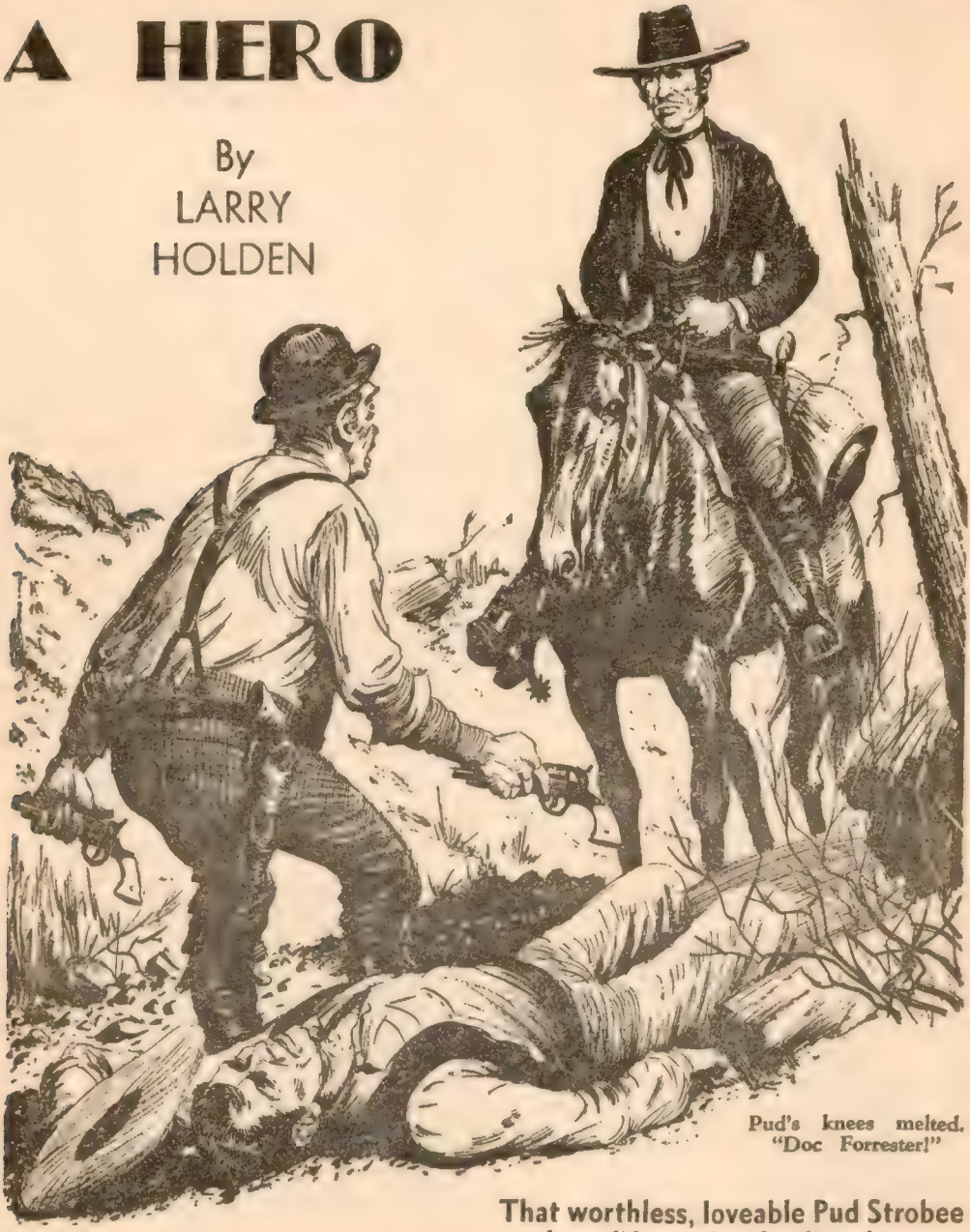

Pud's knees melted. "Doc Forrester!"

That worthless, loveable Pud Strobee made a life-work of oiling his way into drinkin' likker. But when a blood-in-the-eye posse was breathing hot on the back of his head, all his verbal axle-grease could do was talk him right into a hang-noose!

PUD STROBEE grasped the horn with both hands and leaned forward in the saddle to ease his aching bottom. Three days on a horse was too much for a man of Pud's rotund and

blubbery build. His fat face was gray and sagging, pebbled with cold perspiration, although the sun was high and hot. He wanted desperately to lie in the cool, green shade, but the fear that drove him was far greater than the weariness that gnawed at his marrow.

He was north of the Powder River country, he knew, deep into Oregon. Two days before he had forded the Snake River above Homestead, and now he was lost in the craggy ranges of the Wallowa Mountains.

For two and a half days, now, he had known the posse was on his trail. He had twisted and turned in panicky, mad flight, but with Old Man Varney reading sign for them, they had stuck closer than a bur to a blanket.

If only he had stopped that first day when he discovered they were following him. Now he no longer dared. He knew what would happen if those grim, tired men caught him now. Yes, even though he wasn't the man they wanted at all. It was the Cholla Kid they'd been after right from the beginning. It had been a terrible, hideous mistake, the first mistake he had ever known Old Man Varney to make.

He couldn't stop now and say with a grin when they rode up, "The joke's on you, boys. The Cholla Kid rode east."

That wasn't the kind of joke they'd appreciate. Even the presence of Sheriff Newt Vickers, as tough as he was, wouldn't be able to stem the wild fury of the duped posse.

Pud wearily nudged his stumbling horse in the ribs with his heels. "Get on, horse," he mumbled in sodden misery. "Get on out of here. They'll string you up, too."

He groaned as the jolting stride of the horse ground his bones against the saddle. Was it three days ago, or three years, or three centuries, that he'd been standing at the bar of Charley Hauffler's Wagon Wheel Saloon, happily pursuing his favorite occupation of mooching drinks?

JULY Fourth, 1856, the hundred and tenth birthday of the Declaration of Independence, and the last measurable day of happiness in the memory of Pud Strobee. Bale City, Idaho, was celebrating that happy event—the birthday of the Declaration, not Pud's bliss—by setting out to become, one and all, patriotically drunk.

The Wagon Wheel Saloon was jammed to the batwings and, already tiddled to the eyeballs, Mayor Pete Leary was giving a preview of the speech he was to make at three that afternoon. The speech was a little confusing, for the impression seemed to be that Pete Leary had personally won the Revolutionary War, assisted in part by someone known as George Washington and a Sergeant Patrick O'Gady, who turned out to be Pete's cousin. No one objected, for they were as fuddled as he was.

Pud was in his element and having the time of his life. His round face beaming, he gently insinuated himself through the crowd until he stood at the bar. He had already selected his victim, the heavy, hairy Murch Lewis. Murch wasn't very bright.

"Ah, Mr. Lewis," said Pud happily—he had a golden tongue, "This must be a proud day for you, indeed. It was your grandfather, wasn't it, who fought at the battle of Valley Forge with George Washington, General Burgoyne and the rest of them? That calls for a drink, Mr. Lewis. That it does!"

Murch stared blearily at him. "My grandpaw?" he said incredulously. "That old souse?"

"It's a fact, Mr. Lewis," said Pud solemnly. "Only yesterday I read it in a history book. Grandpa Lewis, yessir. He was one of the General's personal camp followers. Ran messages and such. Quite a hero, it said he was, too. You should be proud of him, Murch."

Murch glowered. "Who says I'm not proud?" he demanded. "Battle of Valley

Forge—is that the one y' mean, Pud?"

"July Fourth, 1776. That's one of the things we're celebrating today, Murch. But you knew that, of course."

"Course I knew it. A hero, hey? Whattya know about that! Darn shame they hadda go and hang him down Virginia City. It's tough to be a hero. Hey, Charley!" he roared at the barkeep. "Set 'em up for me an my friend Pud, here. Wotcha drinking, Pud old friend?"

As he toasted old Grandpa Lewis in Charley's best Monongahela, his clinical blue eye roved the bar and pinpointed his next victim. Murch would be good for three, maybe four drinks, but no more. Pud had that gauged to a nicety. He never drank more than his victim could afford. That was sound sense, for the time would come when he'd want Murch to set them up again, and he didn't want to leave him with an unpleasant memory.

Pud pursued his favorite calling with all the shrewdness and acumen of a businessman.

Once in awhile, Pud put in a day's work at the livery stable, for that did not call for any great physical effort, but his steadiest income came from a pair of silver dollars—one of which had two heads, and the other two tails. He kept the head in his right hand pocket and the tails in his left.

"Say, Murch," he said, "bet you a dollar you can't call it two out of three."

"Heads," said Murch.

Pud took the dollar from his right hand pocket and spun it. "By jingo," he said, "a head! Guess this ain't my lucky day. One more head and it's yours."

But the left-handed coin was already in his hand and he flipped it glittering into the air, high enough so Murch's eye would follow it and not notice that he had slipped the other back into his right pocket. Twice it came tails, and Pud moved contentedly down the bar with one of Murch's hard-earned dollars in his pocket. Pud was always modest enough in his levies.

HE wriggled through the press and stood against the bar again, beaming this time on Vince Horne, the blacksmith. Nobody could ever call Vince a moron, for Vince could count every finger on both hands. All together he had six, for a horse had bitten off four—on a bet.

It was a bad horse, the pride and joy of the Circle C. It had never been ridden.

"Gwan," Vince had said. "If he acts up with me, I'll shove my hand down his throat and turn him inside out."

"Bet you can't," grinned the Circle C rider who had brought the horse in to be shod.

It had cost Vince two dollars and four fingers to find out he couldn't.

"Ah, Mr. Horne," purred Vince. "This must be a proud day for you, indeed. It was your grandfather, wasn't it, who fought at the battle of Valley Forge with George Washington, General Burgoyne and the rest of them? That calls for a drink, Mr. Horne. That it does!"

"And in conclusion, ladies and gentlemen," bellowed Mayor Pete Leary for the fourth time. "Let's me point with pride, let's look at the record, let me tell you about the man who . . ."

From down the street, outside, came the double-throated roar of a shotgun.

Someone shouted, "Wheeeeeeee!" and emptied his sixgun into the ceiling.

Bartender Charley Hauffler made a mental note that added twenty dollars to the account of the enthusiastic celebrant.

The shotgun roared again and, soberer than most, Pud Strobee glanced through the window in time to see a man spring to the back of a rangy roan in front of the bank and gallop east out of Bale City, lashing it with his quirt as if a wolf pack had come down from the hills and was snapping at his heels.

The merriment inside the Wagon Wheel Saloon continued at a higher pitch, but

Pud edged closer to the window. Within a few minutes, a man in a black frock coat appeared at the door of the bank doubled over and holding his stomach. It was the banker himself, Jess Carson. He took three long, lurching steps and fell into the dust of the street. He got to his hands and knees and crawled a few yards before he fell again.

A man ran from the lunchroom and crouched at his side. He lifted the banker, held him for a few moments, then gently laid him down. He stood slowly and looked up and down the street, then broke into a lumbering run for the Wagon Wheel.

He burst through the batwings, shouting hoarsely, "The Cholla Kid just held up the bank and killed Jess Carson! Got away with twenty thousand dollars!"

There was a moment of stunned silence, then someone yelled, "Posse! Posse!" There was a mad scramble for the door.

Pud saw the tall, lithe figure of the sheriff, Newt Vickers, stride obliquely across the street from the livery stable and kneel beside the now still body of Jess Carson. He looked up as the crowd spilled hysterically from the wagon Wheel. He stood and held up his hand.

"All right, men," he called clearly, "Let's take it easy and do it right. We'll make a posse, but it's got to be legal."

Pud slipped out the back door and panted toward the livery stable where he had left his horse. He didn't want any part of any posse, and especially did he want no part of a posse that was going after the Cholla Kid.

Except for his pardner, Doc Forrester, the Kid was just about the most dangerous character west of the Bitter Root Mountains. There was a dead-or-alive two thousand dollars on him, but how much money can you spend in a coffin?

Pud swiftly, deftly slid his saddle over the back of his horse, then led it out the back of the livery stable. The Kid had ridden east. And so, wisely, Pud rode west.

Then, to his horror, he discovered that the posse was on *his* trail. An error, to be sure, but a gruesome one!

HIS first thought was to lose them. He would never be able to explain to these vengeful men why he had ridden out of town at the very minute the posse was being sworn in. Never again, if they caught up with him, would anyone ever buy him another drink in the Wagon Wheel.

They'd regard him as something lower than a coyote, as low, maybe, as even a Pawnee, who were almost as low as the Diggers. That had been his first thought —to protect the good will wrought by his golden tongue in the Wagon Wheel.

But he had not counted, however, on the cold gray eye of Old Man Varney, who, it was said, could follow a cockroach across a mile of blanket. The posse had

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followed every twist, every panicky turn, until now it was apparent that it would be on his trail from now on.

Old Man Varney was stubborn, and Sheriff Newt Vickers had a reputation for bringing them in dead or alive—it didn't make much difference which.

The night before they had been so close that Pud could hear their snarling voices as they prepared to camp. Pud had walked his horse for three hours west, leading it until his knees bent backward from sheer fatigue. It was no longer a question of his good will at the bar of the Wagon Wheel. It had gone beyond that.

It was a question of how long his neck would stretch when attached to a rope from the limb of a tree. Nothing would persuade them now that he wasn't in on the robbery with the Cholla Kid. The very least they would say was that he had tipped off the Kid.

He spurred his weary horse down the side of a shallow ravine cut by one of the many branches of the Little Sheep River. The silence here was more dreadful than screams could have been, for it brought home to him how alone he was. Alone and defenseless. Pud carried a gun, to be sure, but he couldn't have hit the bottom of a well if he stood in the bucket.

He swayed in the saddle as the horse plodded upstream, splashing at every step. He had no hope that this simple strategem would fool Old Man Varney, but he was too tired now to care and too hopelessly frantic to give up. Never before in his life had he worked so hard to avoid work. Never before.

The shot was a thundercap. It reverberated in the stony silence until it sounded like a fusillade, surrounding him from every side. He jerked up his horse's head and sat quivering, and the sweat poured from him, clouding his eyes and trickling like fire ants down his sides from his armpits.

They had caught up with him!

In an ecstasy of terror, he raked his jaded horse with his spurs and the poor beast leaped under him like a turpentined jackrabbit. He lost his rein and stirrups and kept his saddle only by clinging to the horn.

He almost lost his saddle again when the horse, with stiff forelegs, slid into the still glowing embers of a campfire. Three hobbled pack horses stood in docile amazement, but even more amazed was the spindly youngster who stood in the clearing, his smoking six-shooter wilting in his hand. He was six feet seven if he was an inch and as skinny as a cactus barb. His bony jaw hung wide and there was terror in his blue eyes.

Pud was weary to the bone, but his quick eyes gathered in the scene as quickly as a croupier gathers in the forfeit chips—the tall, lame roan, the little, wiry buckskin all sadded, the body spread-eagled on the ground beside it.

PUD'S forte was appraising a scene quickly, and he did not need two glances to see that the body was that of the Cholla Kid with the back of his head blown away. Protruding from the holsters lashed low on the Kid's thighs, were the famous, ivory-handled guns, and though the Kid's head was darkly red with blood, the brighter red of his coppery hair still showed through. It was the Cholla Kid beyond any possible possibility of a possible doubt.

At the sight of Pud, the quaking youngster dropped his gun and stammered, "He was stealing my horse, mister. He throwed down on me, and was gonna leave me that lame old scarecrow of his. I shot him as he rid out."

Pud's shrewd mind raced. There was two thousand dollars on the Kid, dead or alive. Here was the Kid dead, with no risk attached.

"That's what you say, son," he said gravely. "But you got any witnesses?"

The youngster gaped around the clear-

ing. There was no one there but Pud, himself and the six horses.

"B-but, he tried to steal my horse, mister," he faltered. "I'm on my way with a load of hardware to that new settlement of Seattle on Elliott Bay in Oregon. I couldn't get there 'thout a horse, could I?"

Pud slid from his horse and picked up the gun the boy had dropped in his fright.

"Son," he said, "you're sure in trouble. If this was just an ordinary horse thief, I wouldn't say a word. Not a word. But, son, you know who you shot? The Cholla Kid, that's who. The Cholla Kid himself! Ordinarily, that'd make you a kind of hero—*if* you were a sworn member of a lawful constituted posse, that is.

"But you ain't. I don't like to say this, son, but your life's in danger from this minute on, cause the Kid's pardner is none other than Doc Forrester. He dresses all in black and he rides a big black horse, and everybody in Idaho knows that Doc's sworn to kill the man that kills the Kid—unless, of course, it was a lawful constituted posse, a member of which I just happen to be. I feel sorry for you, son. That I do." He wagged his head sadly.

The boy licked his lips. "Suppose you'd killed him, mister?"

"That'd be all right, of course. Sure."

"Look, mister. You say you feel sorry for me. Suppose I just get on my horse and take my hardware and get out of here. Who'd be the wiser? Ain't that right, mister?" the boy said eagerly. "And I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll throw in a gallon of honest-to-gawd whiskey 'thout no gunpowder in it. Is it a deal, mister, is it a deal?"

Pud wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, throwing a quick glance at the heavily laden pack horses.

"*One* gallon?" he asked mildly.

"Two gallon, mister. That's all I got."

Pud hesitated, then with a generous gesture, agreed. "It's against the law," he said, "but all right. Now hightail it out of here before the rest of the posse rides in on us."

The boy scrambled to slash the hobbles from his pack horses. He leaped into the saddle of the buckskin. "Look me up if you ever get to Seattle, mister," he called over his shoulder. "I'll be a big man there someday when it gets to be a real city."

Pud waved his hand and said, "Sure will son. Behind his smile was the knowledge that no one as gullible as that would ever be a big man anywhere.

The last echo of the boy's departure had hardly faded from the ravine, when Pud heard the scrabble of hoofs along the stony bed of the ravine. He sprang up with renewed energy. The posse was here, but this time he was glad to see them.

HE bent over the body of the Cholla Kid and jerked those distinctive, ivory-handled sixguns from their holsters. Holding them by the barrels and waving them over his head, he ran down the ravine, shouting:

"I got him, I got him! I got the Cholla Kid! Look, here's his guns. I got him! I got h . . ."

His voice trembled away in dismay. It was not the posse. No one in the posse had a black thoroughbred as tall as that. No one in the posse would dress in black. No one in Bale City had a pale, saturnine face as grim and bony as the one that looked down at him between the ears of the black horse.

Pud's knees melted beneath him and he babbled, "Dah-dah-dah-Doc Forrester . . ."

Doc Forrester's dull, black eyes looked beyond him and rested on the flattened body of the Cholla Kid, and for a moment the hard irises kindled.

"Think of that now," he said softly.

He looked down at the terror-frozen figure of Pud with thin contempt—but his voice was almost pleasant and caressing.

Doc Forrester had a streak of cruelty that was like a naked blade. He could have whipped out his guns and shot Pud down in his tracks.

It would have been no more than target practice for him, and no more dangerous for him. Pud was incapable of moving as much as a finger. But killing him like that would have been too easy—and too fast. Doc wanted to spin it out. He wanted Pud to die with all the agonies of prolonged terror.

"Yes," he drawled, nodding with a travesty of sadness. "This is just what I've been warning the Kid about all these years. Kid, I always said to him, why don't you reform? Someday, I told him, you're going to grow old and decrepit. Why, mister, you wouldn't believe it to look at that fresh and happy face that the Kid was crowding twenty-four—and that's old in this business."

He watched with grim amusement the growing hope in Pud's face.

"Yes," Doc mused on. "And when that happens, Kid, I said, you're bound to run up against a man that's tougher than you. And that's just what happened. I was right, wasn't I, mister?"

The relief that flooded Pud was so sudden that for a moment he was dizzy with it. He looked on Doc Forrester with new eyes. Why, the Doc wasn't grim and deadly at all. He was just sort of, well, kind and sad, like an undertaker.

"Oh, indeed you were right," Pud babbled. "It sounds to me that you were like a father to him. You couldn't have guh-guh-given better advice, if you duh-duh-don't mind my saying so. He should of followed it. That's what he should of. He should of listened to you."

Cynically, Doc watched Pud struggle back to sanity from fear. Now was the time to prod him a little.

"Yes, mister," he said. "The Kid needed this lesson, and I should be grateful. The only thing is, though, you seem to of made the lesson a little too drastic."

Pud's face went ashen again and he stammered, "I wah-wah-what?"

"And now, mister, I'll just naturally have to kill you, I guess." But still he made no movement toward the guns that were strapped low on his thighs.

HE wasn't ready to shoot yet. The sport was too good. He could have laughed out loud at the way Pud started coming apart at the knees, at the way his jaw wobbled, at the way his eyes turned glassy.

"On the other hand, I guess I won't kill you at all," Doc said. "The Kid needed this lesson, and maybe you just got a little over-enthusiastic. Yessir."

Pud staggered against the tree and looked up with tremulous, grateful eyes.

"Yessir," Doc rambled on. "It'd be a shame to kill a real tough man like yourself. I've met tough men face to face and saw them go down, and I've seen them run away, too. But you're tougher than the lot of them, mister. You have to be *real* tough to sneak up behind a man and let him have it in the back of the head, the way you did to the Kid. In the back of the head!" he finished savagely.

Suddenly Pud realized that Doc Forrester had been playing with him all this while. It had been obvious from the first that the Kid had been shot in the back of the head, and it was just as obvious now that Doc had intended to kill him right from the beginning.

With fascinated horror, he watched the Doc's hand slowly dip and just as slowly come up with the gun in it. He let out a wild yell and started to run—but in his terror, he ran straight at the tall, black thoroughbred.

The nervous horse had never been confronted with such a shrieking apparition as this, and it backed frantically. Its legs slipped on the loose, stony bed of the ravine, and it went down, kicking. Doc rolled clear, but for a moment the horse

was between him and the scrambling Pud.

In pushing himself to his knees, Pud suddenly discovered that he had a gun in either hand, and he began to fire madly in all directions. The first bullet sheared off his big toe, the second caromed from the saddle of the thoroughbred.

With a shrill squeal, it leaped over Doc Forrester and fled up the ravine. But as it cleared the crouching outlaw, a wild bullet struck the iron shoe of a frantic hind leg, and it seemed almost as if the indignant animal kicked the bullet into the face of Forrester. Doc grunted and stiffly sat back. He gave Pud a glance of reproach, then slowly toppled sideways.

Pud stared at him, his jaw dropping. He stood, gulped and—fainted.

The posse came to a weary halt and stood silent over the two bodies. Old Man Varney crossed his arms on the horn of his saddle and swore softly.

"Pud Strobee!" he said. "Now who'd ever of thought Pud had it in him to follow sign clear from Bale City?"

From up the ravine, another member of the posse let out a yell. "There's another body up here. It's the Cholla Kid."

The Sheriff breathed incredulously, "He got *both* of them!"

For a moment the posse was silent, then someone said explosively, "Well, dang it all, gents, I propose here and now that we give Pud Strobee the best danged funeral this country ever seen, and I hereby throw twenty dollars in the hat."

Old Man Varney said mildly, "I don't think Pud'd appreciate that. Y'see, he ain't quite dead yet. He's breathing and I don't see a mark on him."

PUD stood at the end of the bar in Charley Hauffler's Wagon Wheel Saloon. There was about him an air of gentle melancholy. For three days now, he had been a hero. Drinks were pushed into his hand before he even had a chance to ask for them. Men he had never seen before bought him round after round.

It was a fine, carefree life, to be sure—but something was missing. The drinks didn't seem to have the flavor they once had, as in the old days when all he had to depend on was his silver tongue and happy imagination. He missed the joy of telling a good story, and mooching a drink.

There were social distinctions, even in the Wagon Wheel. Once Pud had been on the lowest level, all by himself. The next level was the cash customers, who stood at the bar. But the real aristocrats were the quiet, monosyllabic men, who sat at the corner table and played poker.

Pud's eye kindled. If he couldn't be happy, he could at least be an aristocrat.

"Mind if I sit in, gents?" he asked. "I got a little money here I'd like to build up into something real important."

The players looked at one another. Finally, with a sigh, one of them said, "Proud to have you, Pud."

Pud pulled out his money and planked it down on the table.

An hour later he rose—broke.

His eye lighted on the burly figure of Vince Horne, the blacksmith and the strongest man in Bale City. Pud slid up beside him at the bar.

"There's something I gotta tell you, Vince," he said solemnly, "Something I think you oughtta know. When Doc Forrester was on his knees, begging for his life, he said to me, 'Maybe you'd better shoot me after all, stranger. The posse's bound to catch up with me, and there's one man in it I don't want to meet face to face—Vince Horne. Why,' Doc said to me, 'that Vince Horne is so strong that he'd tear me apart, limb from limb, and that's a mighty unpleasant death. Shoot me, stranger, before Vince Horne catches up with me!' Those were his very words, Vince, and if you ask me, that calls for a drink!"

"They'll Never Take Our Land!"

A Smashing California Frontier Novelette

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

Smack into the biggest land-grab scheme ever to bloody the free grass of Spanish California, rode homesteaders Cole and Marta Lavery—with nothing to back them up but a white-hot belief in a hostile, unsettled land—and an immortal faith in the power of right over might!

Lavery turned quickly, reaching for his other gun.

CHAPTER ONE

Squatters Keep Out!

MARTA pressed in a little more closely to Cole—perhaps a woman's instinctive appeal to her husband in time of trouble. With his eyes on the group riding up to their encamped wagon, Lavery disengaged his wife's hands.

"Stay here," he told her quietly.

Marta's back stiffened. "No. I've been beside you all the way from Missouri.

Now we're at last on our own land—our own piece of California—our own beginning. I belong beside you more than ever!"

Lavery frowned and started toward the encamped wagon, from which Marta and he had walked a short distance several moments before. As he moved, he eyed the men dismounting there uneasily. This southern piece of California was troubled country. A friendly party did not approach a camp so boldly as this. Men were jumpy. Violence was close to the surface. Ruthlessness was the stock in trade of many.

The dismounted men at the wagons ignored Lavery's approach. One took up an ax and went to work on the spokes of one wagon wheel. Another tumbled a sack of flour from the wagon and slit it end-to-end with one stroke of a broad-bladed knife. A third kicked over Marta's bright little cast-iron stove, his heavy, iron-capped boots shattering the castings like glass.

The man at the wagon wheel stepped back. The wheel collapsed. The wagon tilted crazily. Marta's trunk, shaken loose from its place inside, tumbled out onto the ground, spilling its contents.

Lavery made no outcry. He was too wise for this. But such an anger as he had never known shook him. He moved steadily up, stopping to face one man of the raiding party who stood a little apart from the others. He was obviously their leader. A man wearing a belted gun stood at ease and watched the destruction his fellows were working with bland satisfaction. He was a handsome man, well-dressed, a little florid, and as Yankee as a silver dollar.

Lavery spoke quietly to him, the heat of his anger forging his voice to a fine hot edge.

"If you're looking for a short road to hell, mister, you've sure found it. I promise you that!"

The man spat carefully with the wind. "You're squatting on private grass—a piece of my ranch."

"I've got a deed to it, signed by the governor," Lavery protested.

"A Mexican deed," the man snorted. "Not worth the paper it's written on. The only valid titles in this country are American, written on good old United States papers and signed with Yankee names. That's the kind I'm going to have to all the land on this bench—twenty miles of it. No Mexican-deed squatters are going to cloud my title before I've got U. S. papers on it! This is a rancher's country. You've had your warning. We've left you your horses. Now, get off this grass and stay off it!"

Lavery stared at the man, bitter with impotence, clinging to the knowledge there was at this moment nothing he could do, knowing that to control his anger was to save his life. Marta straightened beside him and spoke in a cool, unhurried voice.

"Maybe you didn't understand my husband. This is our land. Supposing you and your dirty-necked coyotes take your own advice."

The tall man took a sudden angry step forward. "I've wasted enough time with you mule-heads. And I don't take lip from any woman."

Lavery made his protest, then, forcing it through the tight wall with which he contained his livid fury. "My wife's condition is delicate. Do your business with me, mister!"

"Are you going to start moving—now?" the man asked.

Lavery looked at Marta. Her head was still high. She answered. "We'll be here when you and every man like you in California has been hanged!" she said with a savage conviction.

The man stabbed his finger at Lavery. "All right, I'll do my business with you, squatter. It takes a Yankee to take the stubbornness out of a stubborn Yankee and I know how it's done. Spread him

out against a wagon-wheel, boys, and a couple of you keep this witch turned so that she can see Cy McGann plays for keeps!"

GRASS was cool beneath Lavery's naked, ribboned back. A high midnight moon shone in his eyes. Pain tore at every fiber of his body. He had a moment of dull shame—the shame of a strong man who has collapsed before an enemy and before the woman he loves. This passed swiftly and Lavery felt only the tremendous tide of his anger and the desire to move. He sat up.

Marta sat a scant pair of yards away from him, leaning awkwardly against the side of her overturned trunk, her chin on her breast. He could not tell if she was sleeping or not. Fear knifed through him —the only real fear he believed he would ever know again—fear for her.

This had been their land, bought with money carefully hoarded. This had been their place under the sun, the sod in which their roots would anchor. This had been their first night upon that land.

Marta had seen her sunset happiness shattered. She had felt the touch of violent hands upon her. She had seen further violence done Cole himself. Certainly it had been Marta who had cut him down from the wagon wheel to which he had been lashed after the departure of Cy McGann and his men. It had been Marta who had rubbed his stripped back with ointment and had rolled him onto the coolness of the grass. It had been Marta, stirring in the darkness, who had brought some order out of the chaos of the ruined camp.

She was expecting her child in the spring and such shocks as these were dangerous for a woman in her condition. Crawling because the distance was short, Lavery reached her side and anxiously gripped her shoulders.

"Marta!" he said with soft intensity.

She trembled slightly and raised her head. She had been sleeping, after all. "Cole, they hurt you so."

"The hurts are where even you can't see them," Cole told her grimly.

"We had something so wonderful here tonight," Marta breathed. "Now we're left with nothing."

"We haven't lost so much, girl," Cole said. "There's still the two of us—and the land. What's a wagon and a stove and a trunk full of clothes?"

"But there's nothing we can do—" Marta protested. Lavery's grip on her shoulders tightened.

"That's what McGann thinks. But he's wrong, Marta. At supper tonight no one owed us anything and we had no capital for a start here. Now it's different. When we've collected what this McGann and his boys owe us for damages here, maybe our beginning will be better than we hoped, after all.

"I'll get you blankets from the wagon, now. In the morning we'll ride back to the mission at San Juan Capistrano. I'll have to leave you there for a few days. The *padres* will take care of you."

It hurt Lavery to say this. It hurt Marta to hear it. But a man in a raw country had to be practical. So did a woman.

"Yes, Cole," Marta answered softly.

CHAPTER TWO

Smuggler's Cove

MISSION San Juan Capistrano lay in the widest part of the valley of San Juan Creek, about three miles from the ocean. Below it was a village and there was a clustering of shacks at tidewater where a casual lightering business in hides was done whenever a Yankee trading ship anchored off the mouth of the creek.

Between the northern outposts of San Gabriel and Pueblo Los Angeles and the old first city of California at San Diego

de Alcala, San Juan was the only stopping place of importance along the Camino Real—the mission highway paralleling the coast.

An hour after sunrise, before the sleepy village in the valley roused, Cole and Marta Lavery knocked at the mission gates. A kindly and courteous Father Superior listened to their troubles and willingly agreed to look after Cole's wife in his absence.

"It's hard to understand your countrymen," the padre told Lavery. "We've seen many recently. Hard and greedy men. There have been other cases like this you report—people of my own race, driven from land to which they hold titles issued by the old government. We're a long ways from the gold fields here and it seems a strange place to find greed."

"You know of this Cy McGann, then," Lavery said. "What's he after?"

"He's driven everyone from a twenty-mile strip of the coastal grass to the south. Apparently he intends to keep it clear of settlement until the Federal Land Commission of the new government gets around to studying this part of the territory. When it does, he'll probably put in a spurious claim to the land he's chosen and try to make it stick.

"If there are no other settlers on it, I think he'll be successful. To cover up his real purpose, he can stir serious trouble here in the south. There are hotheads among my people who hate the Yankee government only because it is new."

"It sounds like a case for the authorities," Lavery said sharply.

The old padre smiled wearily. "What authorities? We had first a government by my own religious order—missionaries pushing into a wilderness. Then that of a vice-royalty of Spain. Then that of a Republican Mexico, too troubled at home to worry about a distant province. Now the Yankee flag. There is no authority in the south of California, Señor Lavery, except that of the sword and that of the fist."

Lavery rose from the bench on which he had been sitting. "I want two things from you, Father. A list of every little title-holder who has been driven off the grass along this stretch of the coast. And I want to know where I can find this Cy McGann."

"There's a place called Smuggler's Cove, some miles down the coast from your tract of San Stefan," the old priest said. "It's been used by the lawless since the first trading ships reached these waters. McGann will be there, I think. Look, we were about to sit down to breakfast when you knocked at the gate. If you and Señora Lavery will join us, I'll have a clerk make up the list you require while we eat."

Lavery nodded agreement. Marta and he joined the mission brothers at their meal. At its end a clerk brought the Father Superior the list Cole had requested. The padre handed it to Cole.

"I give you this for one reason, my son," he said. "You will find good friends among these names if you seek them."

"That isn't why I asked for it," Cole told him bluntly. The old man smiled.

"I didn't ask your reasons," he murmured. "I'm merely giving you a reason that's acceptable to me. Have you forgotten that it is written—vengeance is the Lord's?"

"No," Cole said. He folded the list and put it into the pocket of his shirt. As an afterthought, he produced the deed which gave Marta and himself title to San Stefan rancho.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd keep this for a while."

The Father Superior nodded, took the deed, and turned toward his cell. Marta walked with Cole to the mission gate. "Three days, Cole. I can stand not hearing from you—not seeing you—for only three days. If you're not back by then, I'll start out to look for you."

Cole kissed her. "You and the padre! He says no revenge, and you expect a miracle in three days. It's all right. If I can't do what I have to in three days, thirty years couldn't be enough time. We'll have supper two nights from tonight—together."

Marta clung to him for a moment, then let him go in silence.

MOVING from San Juan across the grass of San Stefan and on to the southward in the direction of Smuggler's Cove, Lavery studied the country. Now, since he was struggling for ownership of a portion of it, he saw it with different eyes. Unlike so much of the interior valley country of California which he had seen, this coastal bench was rich in its own right, not requiring water to turn it green. Ocean fogs, rolling in even in dry season, accounted for this. It was not a planter's country. There was not enough water for this. But it was a cattleman's paradise. It was easy to understand why Cy McGann wanted this particular twenty miles.

The business of California ranchers had always been in cattle—poor and scrubby creatures whose greatest asset was that they had skin upon their backs. All California beef was raised for hides and tallow alone. The carcasses were given to the incredibly poor Indians of the inland hills or left to rot in the sun when they were skinned out.

Lavery saw a different kind of operation, the same thing which McGann must also see. At one time a hundred ships called off of San Diego and Pueblo Los Angeles where now one called. At one time soon, gold-seekers from the north, weary of trying to win fortunes by luck, would drift southward by the thousands into this more pleasant land. They would again think of the trades and farms at which they had worked in the East before gold hysteria had brought them across the country.

Beef herds, raised for beef instead of for hides, and carefully built up through the years, could produce fortunes when a new and growing country began to clamor for more food than it had ever needed before. It was for this reason that Marta and he wished to build here. McGann must have a similar wish. Otherwise this bench would have no value to him.

As he rode south, Lavery reviewed his own position. The seizure of the California government from the dying Mexican rule in 1846 had foreshadowed quarrels and contests over land claims which were flooding the commission set up to study and settle them in the north. A great many of those who held old titles to unimproved land upon which they couldn't prove occupancy were hastily selling them off for whatever price they could get.

San Stefan, ten thousand acres of the most beautiful grassland Cole had ever seen, had cost Marta and himself a little less than three thousand dollars in American cash. The old man who sold it to them, a descendant of the original grantee, had been honest enough to tell them that they might find their title hard to prove and harder to hold. A man gained nothing without risk, and there was only one other way to secure land here. McGann's way.

It was possible that McGann was thinking even beyond the value of the land itself. It was possible that he was aware his plan would give him twenty miles of country through which the Camino Real passed —the one land route from San Diego to Los Angeles. The pressures he could put on whoever travelled that road were many and varied.

It was the old story of one man taking from others for his own profit. Lavery realized that a man less direct than he was might have spent months trying to obtain official sanction and the help of others who had been similarly injured. A less direct man might have devised an intricate plot

to defeat McGann. However, it was in Lavery's blood to be as direct as a bullet in flight. To Cole the obvious course was to invoke McGann's own thinking against him—to take from him as he was attempting to take from others.

Stiffened by a long ride on his awkward-gaited wagon horse and from the drying scars of the thorough rope's-end lashing he had taken against his own wagon wheel the night before, Lavery dismounted late in the afternoon some distance up the little dry creek running into the sea at Smuggler's Cove.

CHAPTER THREE

Death Watch

THE outlaw hangout was a brief collection of brush shacks, a short wooden street, and a small boat landing, protected from the surge of the open sea by a tongue of rock and from the openness of the bench country behind it by a steep arroyo. Lying on his belly on the brink of the bluff above the water, Lavery studied the settlement below for some time. A small, dirty, well-weathered ship rode her hawsers some distance off-shore. A ship's small-boat was nosed into the sand below the settlement.

Above this, safely beyond high water-mark, rose an untidy stack of barrels, hogsheads, crates, and packing cases. The sand between this careless pile and the water's edge was torn up by the feet of many men. Lavery judged that these were supplies or merchandise of some kind which had been landed from the ship. However, he was puzzled by the fact that the seamen who must have rowed the smallboat ashore were nowhere in sight about the settlement.

There were, however, a number of idling Yankees moving along the board-walk before the seaward-facing huts of the town. Among them Lavery recognized at least two of those who had broken up the camp Marta and he had established on San Stefan. Satisfied that this was the headquarters McGann was using, Lavery withdrew from the bluff to wait the coming of darkness, using the intervening time to study in detail the steeply slanting arroyo which gave land access to the settlement. By the time the sun had briefly silhouetted the ugly, bluff-bowed little ship and had dropped on behind the horizon, Lavery had memorized every inch of the descending arroyo and the set-up of Smuggler's Cove.

He was disconcerted when, with lowering darkness, Cy McGann issued from one of the shacks and detailed two men who took up guard positions at the bottom of the land entrance. Lavery had no choice now but to start along the rim of the bluff until he could find another arroyo which would drop him to the water's edge.

He walked nearly two miles before he found a suitable place, and once on the sand, he worked back up the beach. He was well within earshot of the uproar of drinking men, when he heard a small party working along the sand toward him. Pressing in among some rocks at the base of the bluff, he waited.

The tide was low. In the faint remaining afterglow of sunset he made out four men. Among them were two he recognized as a portion of the raiding party at San Stefan. They were alternately dragging and kicking a fifth man along through the sand.

Abreast of Lavery they turned down across the black, slippery rocks exposed by the receding tide, dragging their prisoner with them. They worked with unhurried callousness, fastening the man in a spread-eagle on a particularly nasty pile of rocks far below the high-tide line. Leaving him there, they turned back toward the shacks of the cove.

When they were gone Lavery moved down to the rocks, taking care to walk

only on exposed crags and to keep the prints of his boots out of the wet sand. The man pionioned on the rocks was of middle age, graying somewhat, and he was dressed in blue seaman's clothing of good material and cut. It had been badly torn and misused, apparently in struggles with his captors. The man had been mercilessly mauled about the head and face and lay quietly without moving.

Lavery was about to approach when a sound up the beach drew his attention. He moved back to the rocks at the base of the bluff. A man came unhurriedly down along the sand, found a rock to his liking, and sat down upon it. It was obvious he had been detailed to keep an eye on the man spread-eagled on the rocks.

Lavery moved soundlessly and with an increasing rush down across the sand, launching himself in the last ten feet in a flying leap. His body struck the man at the shoulder and carried him forward onto the sand.

THE fellow twisted in a startled frenzy, trying to reach his gun. Lavery pinned the gun, tore it from his hand, and kicked it aside, coming to his feet. The man on the sand also bounded up, opening his mouth to shout alarm. Lavery hit him hard in the center of his face, silencing the sound.

The man pawed at Cole to keep him away and tried to shout again. Lavery went quietly and efficiently to work.

The tangle lasted perhaps a minute and a half. No longer. Lavery had much work to do and little time in which to do it. The man before him broke completely after this brief run of seconds, unable to withstand the terrible mauling of Lavery's hands. He sagged heavily and soundlessly into the sand, unconscious.

In driving a blow to the man's midsection, Lavery had bruised his hand against a money-belt there. He ripped open the shirt and stripped the belt away. It was heavy but gave off no metallic sound. Cole understood. It was loaded with dust, rather than mined or minted metal—dust from the creeks to the north. There was a small fortune in the pockets of this belt.

Lifting the tail of his own shirt, Lavery strapped the belt on and tucked the shirt back in over it. He stripped the man's gun-belt and buckled it about his own hips. He recovered the weapon he had earlier kicked aside and meticulously cleaned the sand from it. Then he lifted the unconscious Yankee and carried him down across the rocks to the placé where the man in seaman's clothing lay spread-eagled.

The rocks on which the seaman lay were filled with barnacled crevices. The man's feet and wrists had been kicked down into these barbed crevices so that they were firmly wedged. In his condition the man could not break free. Returning tide was certain to submerge him.

Working swiftly, inwardly wincing at the damage he was forced to do the man's already lacerated feet and arms, Lavery loosened the spread-eagled seaman and lifted him clear. Having done this, he spilled the body of the guard into the same position and forced his boots and wrists down into the same crevices.

Carrying the seaman back to a more comfortable place at the base of the bluff, Lavery wet his own kerchief with sea water from a pool and carefully cleansed the man's battered face and his torn wrists and ankles. He hunkered beside the man with grim satisfaction, his eyes on the strip of beach lying between his present position and the shacks of Smuggler's Cove.

He thought he had stripped the table of stakes in the first round of the game, and that he would be able to wipe the second clean before McGann even realized he had an opponent.

A few minutes after midnight, at the

usual time for guard replacing, a second man came down along the sand from the noisy shacks of the settlement. He was whistling and unhurried, apparently warmed by his own share of the drinking which had been going on among the brush huts up the beach. As he neared the place where the seaman had been stretched out on the rocks, he paused uncertainly as though in search of the first guard—the man whom he was to relieve.

Lavery rose from behind the rock he had been using for a shelter and made an unintelligible grunting sound. The guard swung with relief toward him. Lavery moved swiftly forward, his gun out.

"Quiet and careful!" he snapped.

The relief guard grunted astonishment and alarm but the gun in Lavery's hand was compelling. Unwilling to have the man either see his face or recognize it, Cole snapped another command: "Turn around!"

THE guard did so unwillingly. Cole stepped up behind him and lifted his gun from its holster, determining as he did so that this man, also, wore a heavy money-belt. "Shed your dust, too!" he ordered.

The man hesitated for a moment, then wheeled desperately. Cole jerked the muzzle of the gun in his hand upward in a long arc. The barrel struck flush along the line of the man's jaw. He turned and he fell like an undercut tree. Cole slid the money-belt under his shirt, and carefully propped the man's body in a somnolent upright position against the rock.

Satisfied that the appearance here was now casually that of one man on guard over another lying out on the rocks near the water's edge, Lavery retreated to where he had left the injured seaman. The man had regained consciousness. He eyed Lavery warily. Cole spoke shortly to him.

"Can you walk?"

The seaman nodded, speaking with difficulty. "All the way to hell, if it means getting out of here."

"Not that far," Cole told him. "Just to a place where we can hole up. We've got a lot of work to do here yet. Whose ship is that offshore?"

"Mine. Or was, till I came ashore. I'm Captain Enos Hale. Who the devil are you?"

"A gent Cy McGann pushed an inch too far," Cole answered. "Lavery is the name. How'd you get on McGann's blacklist? I thought what he wanted was ashore. What's a ship got to do with his plans?"

"I've done business here at this cove with one man or another in past seasons," Captain Hale said. "Called this time at the roadstead off Los Angeles to see if I couldn't make a top-price deal for my cargo of merchandise.

"A man brought me word if I'd slip down here so the buyer could avoid territorial customs charges on my stuff, I could get the deal I wanted. Kind of smuggling, but always sound business before the revolt. Mexican customs almost tariffed us traders out of business and most of us learned how to get around port authorities."

"McGann was your buyer?"

Captain Hale nodded. "Agreeable as hell, too. Had his men do all the lightering of my cargo ashore so my boys wouldn't even have to leave the ship. I wouldn't have any crew ashore when he threw the hooks to me. When the stuff was stacked on the beach, I came after my money.

"When I landed, he grabbed me. Told me that since I'd smuggled the stuff ashore and had no recourse with the authorities because of that, he wasn't going to pay me a red cent. When I'd agree to order my ship south to San Diego, he'd send me south along the coast to rejoin her there."

"You told him—?"

"To go to hell!" the captain answered with spirit. "He's no usual half-smuggler, half-pirate. He's got something else up his sleeve. He and his men have got a fortune in gold among them. Carry it in belts on them. Brought it down from the north. Probably panned it out of the creeks up there at gunpoint. He could have paid me but wouldn't. That doesn't go with Enos Hale."

"So he spread you out to drown."

"Or break down and give in. It would have worked, if you hadn't come along. My boys on the *Queen* know something's wrong, but they only work for pay and they've got to think of the ship. They wouldn't risk coming in against McGann's outfit. They'd wait awhile, then up-anchor and pray for a running wind. So it was give in or die for me."

CHAPTER FOUR

Treasure Trove

LAVERY considered Captain Hale's story. Trade goods set ashore here meant McGann had some use for them. Cole had not figured McGann as a trader. He said so. The captain of the *Queen* shifted position painfully.

"This country's been asleep for years," he said. "It's just coming alive. It needs everything. That's what a trader's cargo is, these days—everything. I'd rather be ashore here with a load of trade goods than I would to have the best claim in the Mother Lode. There'd be more profit from it in the long run. McGann knows that. Does it make sense to you, Lavery?"

Cole nodded. If McGann had twenty miles of this coast to control and could establish himself as a trader for the whole area, too, the growth of the country would bring him wealth a man couldn't measure.

"McGann's working at gunpoint where he can," Enos Hale went on, "but if he gets in a tight, he can buy himself out of it, too. He and his boys are loaded with dust. Got an iron safe of it in McGann's shack at the cove, besides what he and the rest are carrying on them."

Lavery stood up. "That's what interests me—their dust."

"And their blood!" Hale growled. "Me too, Lavery. Supposing me and you go partners in this business you claim you've got ahead of you?"

Lavery studied the man for a moment, then handed him the gun he had taken from the second guard. Hale balanced it in his lacerated hand with a surprising show of skill. He grinned widely.

"Counting McGann and checking off those two down there on the rocks that you've put out of business," he said with relish, "there's eight men left at the cove. And there's two of us. Right interesting odds. Where we going to start?"

Lavery thought of the careful study he had made of the layout of the cove and the arroyo.

"At the top," he said, and he pointed to the rim of the sea-bluff above them.

There was sand in Enos Hale. All movement was painful for him, but he rose and followed Lavery gamely down the beach to the arroyo. He climbed up through this to the bench above without complaint. They moved back along the bench to a position on the bluff directly over the huddled shacks of Smuggler's Cove. The two of them hunkered down. Presently three or four men, one of them carrying a lantern, emerged from a shack and started along the beach in the direction of the rocks on which Enos Hale had been wedged.

The captain eyed them with concern. "They're going to find out what's happened down there in a couple of minutes. They're going to find out you've taken a bite out of their backside. And McGann isn't a boy that'll stand still. What do we do then?"

"Take another bite," Lavery said bluntly.

THE lantern bobbed far down the bench and halted. A moment later a man came running back, laboring in the soft sand. He began to shout as he neared the settlement. Doors burst open. Several men came out onto the rickety boardwalk which served as a street. One of them was Cy McGann.

The man from down the beach spoke hurriedly. McGann barked orders and the whole group started back along the beach. Lavery chuckled. He turned to Hale.

"Begin to see where we set out teeth next?"

Hale nodded. "Sure. You've been hurt and I haven't been paid for the goods I landed. The answer to that is the dust in McGann's safe. But how do you get to it, boy? I sure as hell can't climb up and down this cliff."

"No," Lavery agreed. "You stay here. I know the way down. I took pains to study it earlier. Night light is bad and it's a long ways for sure range with a handgun. It'll be up to you to keep them off my back if they double back up the beach. What shack is the safe in?"

Hale pointed out the shelter from which Cy McGann had emerged, but he was frowning. "I got knocked down and fell against that chunk of gold-lined iron. I got a good look at it. You won't get into it with your teeth. Now, if there was a way to get word to my boys on the *Queen*, maybe I could talk them into coming ashore and lending a hand."

"Not enough time," Lavery said shortly. "Can't afford it. No way to get a message out, anyway. We'll move over to the head of the arroyo leading down into the cove. You'll stay at the top with all our spare ammunition. I'm going to empty that safe."

Enos Hale whistled admiration and perhaps disbelief, but said nothing further, stiffly rising to follow as Lavery moved toward the head of the arroyo. They trooped on single file.

Lavery felt satisfaction in his own ability at memorization. He moved down the slanting, uncertain footpath leading to the beach at Smuggler's Cove with ease, each twist and bad spot turning up as he thought it should. Darkness lay against the sea-bluff. He could not tell how long McGann and his men would be absent down the beach, examining the prints Enos Hale and he had left as partial explanation of what had happened to the guards at the water's edge.

Reaching the bottom of the footpath, Lavery moved along the rickety wooden walk between the huddled shanties, his eyes darting into the shadows. Presently he saw what he wanted—a rusty bar of iron, one end of which had been hammered flat for use as a prize. With this in his hand, he turned into Cy McGann's shack. The place was an arsenal.

He had no difficulty locating the safe of which Enos Hale had spoken. With sight of it came a surge of elation. Strongboxes were being manufactured in an increasing variety of makes and kinds, some of them too stout for any but the most skillful breakers. This, however, was an old cast-iron box with a corroded nickel combination dial and a trip-lever against the opening side of the door. Lavery had seen one opened with a great deal of weight and violence.

Careless now of sound, with haste his prime objective, Lavery rammed the flattened end of the prize-bar behind the lip of the combination dial and brought steady pressure to bear. The pressure increased slowly as he leaned his weight against it. The metal gave just a little, protesting rustily.

Outside, a handgun banged on the crest of the bluff and shouting surged up, startled and loud.

CHAPTER FIVE

Free Land!

LAVERY knew there was no hurrying the job on his hands now. With luck the pressure he was bringing against the combination dial of the safe might snap the key-blades of the lock and draw the whole mechanism out of the safe door. But too sharp a strain might snap the combination shaft before the lock itself pulled.

He heard running feet hit the far end of the wooden walk. The gun on the bluff, fired with cool unhurriedness by Enos Hale, snapped twice more, then fell silent. Men below answered the fire. The steel against which Cole was prying still continued to protest the strain but did not give. More shots sounded outside.

Suddenly, when his attention was on these exterior sounds, when he was measuring the seconds left before he would have to abandon the safe and sprint for the arroyo path and safety, the safe rocked and the combination and lock pulled out. Protesting steel screamed loudly in the shack.

At the other end of the walk a man barked sharp inquiry, then roared an order, apparently stirred by the sound. Lavery thrust two fingers in the hole left in the safe door by the pulled lock assembly and depressed the pawls which held the locking bar of the door. The bar itself, however, seemed rusted too much to move with the small leverage his fingers could manage.

A man's boots beat on the walk outside. With the fingers of one hand still thrust into the hole in the safe door, Lavery turned and fired his gun at a silhouette appearing in the shack doorway.

He only brushed the man. The fellow yelped and ran back along the walk. Suddenly the locking bar of the safe door clicked and the door swung open. A fat row of buckskin bags sat on the safe floor. Cole scooped them into his shirt and ducked out onto the walk, moving awkwardly with the fresh, heavy burden against his belly. Enos Hale was firing again from the bluff, but Cy McGann was shrewd.

The tracks Cole and Enos Hale had left on the sand down the beach had betrayed the fact that there were only two of them. Realizing this and hearing Hale firing from above, McGann had driven his men to separate the two who were making this attack against him. Rather than rush the shack, McGann had wedged his crew into a pocket under the bluff at the foot of the arroyo pathway.

With the men in this position, Hale could not reach them from above. Cole himself could not make his way back up the arroyo. McGann would wait for better light and then flush him out from among the shacks. Lavery swore silently.

The mauled and lacerated ship captain on the bluff above was not this easily cheated of revenge. There was a wink of light from above, then a fiercely burning greasewood root came sailing out and down. It landed on the thatched brush roof of a shack some distance from Lavery.

A man in McGann's crew broke cover and started climbing up to shake the firebrand free. Lavery dropped to one knee, aimed carefully, and rolled the fellow from the roof to the ground. Lavery leaped far to one side as he shot to avoid any return fire. Half a dozen guns banged at the muzzle flash and one marksman almost guessed his leap correctly, slamming a bullet through his now-bulging shirt.

McGann's voice rose angrily: "Get that fire out!"

It was a useless command. The dry brush of the roof was already burning fiercely, throwing a widening halo of light over the cove. Nevertheless, two men did try to snuff the flames, only to be checked

as Enos Hale threw gunfire from above at them.

McGann's voice bellowed another order: "Leave the one down here to. He can't slip away unless he can swim. Get up the trail and flush that devil off the bluff—all of you!"

THERE was a concerted rush for the foot of the arroyo. Lavery rose from the place where he had been crouching and sprinted heavily for the trail. Hale could hold back two or maybe three men, but not the whole force. The seaman was so crippled by the injuries he had suffered at the hands of these men that he couldn't retreat from them.

This was the close fighting he had wanted to avoid. Lavery had to give Hale some diversion under which he could fall back to a safer place.

He heard men scrambling up the steep slope ahead of him as he reached the foot of the bluff, but this, also, was apparently a trap McGann had set. A figure suddenly appeared before him, stepping out of shadows among the rocks. A gun flamed almost in his face. He felt a savage, spinning blow in his midsection and went down under it.

McGann's voice rang out triumphantly: "One down!"

The man jumped forward, then, his foot swinging for a merciless kick at Lavery's prostrate figure. Snagging out one hand as he rolled to avoid the blow, Lavery caught the man's boot and tugged hard on it. McGann lost his balance and spilled down.

Lavery reached his knees just as McGann rolled his gun clear. Cole was hurried and made a messy shot. McGann's face vanished in a welter of ruin, even as he steadied his gun for a second shot.

Aware of a rent in his shirt and something spilling from it, Lavery realized McGann's bullet had lodged in one of the pouches of gold dust, taking his wind with impact, but doing no other injury. He started scrambling up the arroyo path after McGann's climbing men, only to realize suddenly that there was silence at the upper end—not even the sound of movement.

Puzzled, he straightened cautiously at the top of the path. McGann's men were there. So also, was Enos Hale, grinning as he walked under upraised hands to strip from each the money-belt he wore. And beyond Hale and McGann's men other figures were indistinct in the darkness. All but one.

"Marta!" Cole grunted, recognizing her instantly.

She ran to him, grapping her arms excitedly about the pouch-thickened bulge of his shirt. "Cole, you didn't really think I could wait for three days, did you? Not when you were in danger!"

Lavery saw then the bright, smiling Spanish faces of the men behind her—men wearing rich togs and poor. Men with a traditional racial enjoyment in the tokens of affection exchanged between a man and his woman.

"I made the Father Superior tell me where I could find our neighbors on either side of San Stefan—the ones McGann ran off ahead of us," Marta hurried on. "We all came together to help you take care of a neighborhood problem. Cole, what on earth have you got tucked away inside your shirt?"

"Gold," Lavery said. "Enough to pay us—and these neighbors of yours, Marta—for the damages they suffered at McGann's hands. Enough to pay Captain Hale, here, for the goods he landed and the beating he took. Some left over for the Father Superior and the Mission San Juan, I think."

ENOS HALE limped over to stand beside Lavery and his wife. He eyed them both with speculation. "I've got an idea," he said. "You two aim to ranch

here. Ain't no doubt you'll hold onto title to your land, now. I'm after long-term profits, rather than just quick and small ones.

"Supposing I consign my goods to you. You seem to be in good with your neighbors. They're going to have to build, same as you. They'll need supplies. And there ought to be trade along the Camino Real, passing your place. Supposing the Laverys, Ma'am and Mister, go into partnership with me. I stock the place. You build the store. We'll split what we make. How does that kind of a deal sound to you?

"I got a notion I'd like to retire here when I'm done with the sea, and that'd be a nice business to have a piece of. Supposing you give my gold to the padre, too, and then you can go into business with me."

Marta looked at Lavery. He frowned. "I've got my hands full, Hale. I wish I could, but I have too much to do."

"But I haven't!" Marta cut in. "That's just it. While you're building up San Stefan, I can be building the store and making friends. Please, Cole, let that be my job. I didn't come out here to take a rest cure."

"Looks like you've got yourself some partners, Captain Hale," Lavery said with a wry grin. The seaman chuckled with satisfaction and turned to look at the country behind them, coming now into focus in the increasing dawn light.

"Beautiful," he said. "Hard to figure why there'd have to be so much trouble over it. Hope that's done with. It's time for it to grow."

"Yes," Marta agreed. "It is beautiful, Captain. Almost too beautiful. We've a great deal of work to do. It will take a big country to hold all the people that will come here."

Marta turned toward Cole, then, smiling widely.

"Our neighbors stopped to right our wagon at San Stefan, Cole. We spent our first night of ownership on our ranch. I'd like to spend a little of the second there, too. Captain Hale and our neighbors can come along behind us and be our guests. We'll have breakfast together and then a celebration—a real fiesta—on Mr. McGann."

THE END

HANGNOOSE HUNGRY!

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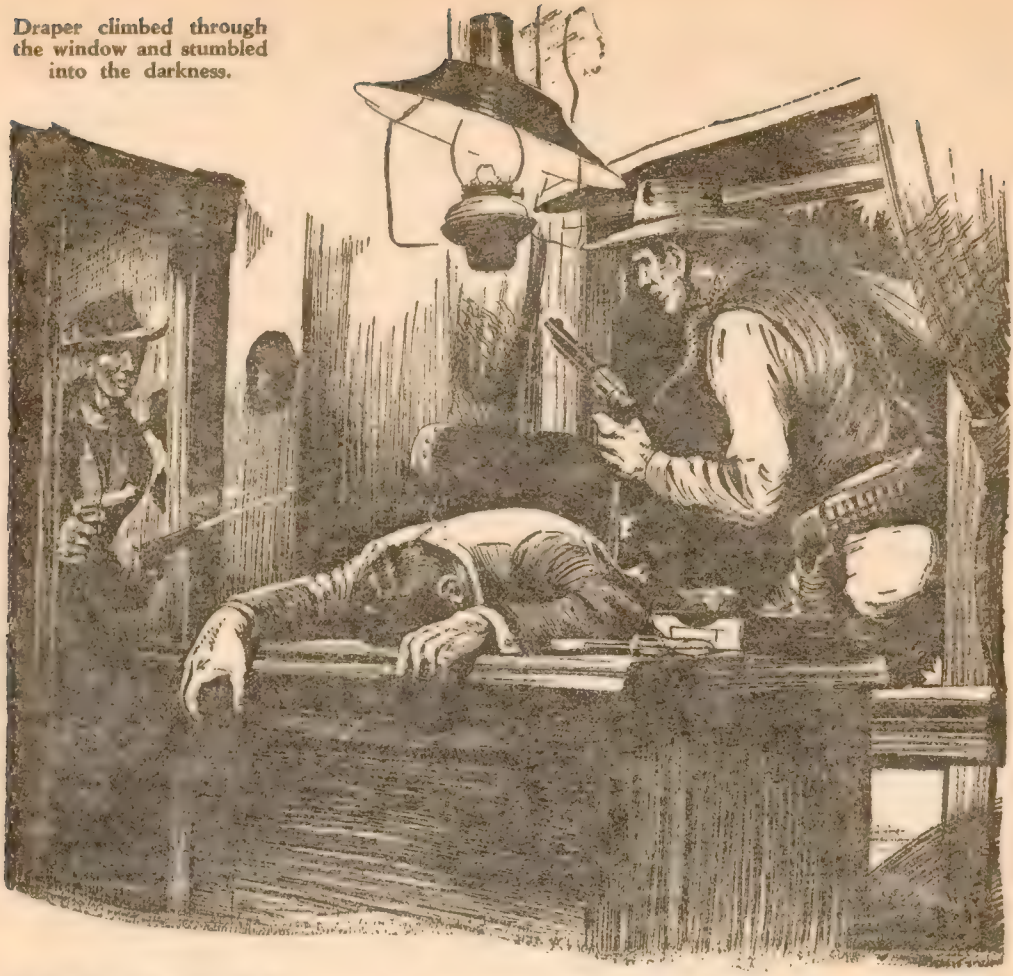


Draper climbed through the window and stumbled into the darkness.

BEEF—A BULLET A HEAD!

By PHILIP KETCHUM

THEY cut ten head of cattle from the herd in the north meadow and after this, Ed Hardesty called Joe Draper aside and gave him his final instructions.

"You can bed 'em down tonight in the old Watts corral," he suggested. "Then, if you get an early start in the morning, you can make it to the junction of Easter Creek and the Saw-Tooth. Bolitho's men will meet you there and take them off your

Could Joe Draper's natural fear of flying lead and the threat of a hard-eyed cattle rustler outweigh his pride over an old man's faith in his courage?

hands. They'll pay you thirty dollars a head. That's three hundred dollars, cash money. Take care of it. Don't risk a trip on in to Dyer Gulch. Get home with the money. I need it to make a payment to the Ludlow bank."

Joe Draper nodded. Since he was going to be so close to Dyer Gulch he would have liked to visit the new mining camp which had grown up almost overnight; but in view of the money he would be carrying and the nature of life in Dyer Gulch, he could appreciate the wisdom of Hardesty's suggestion that he come right home.

"I don't think you'll have any trouble," said Hardesty. "If I figured there would be trouble I never would have made the deal with Mal Bolitho, or I would send some of the other men. This is a job I think you can handle. And it's important. Don't fail me, Joe. Get that money back here in four days."

Joe grinned. He had an easy, friendly grin. He nodded his head. "I'll get it here, Mr. Hardesty."

Three other riders for the Bar Anchor ranch had come up here with him and Ed Hardesty and these men now crowded around him and offered their caustic advice.

"Keep away from those women in the Gulch," said Steve Morehouse. "They tell me they're dynamite."

"Bring me back a chunk of gold," called Tex Andrews. "Just a little one. Maybe as big as your fist."

"Shucks, Ed," said Slim Carse, "why send a kid on a job like this? I would really appreciate a trip to the Gulch."

"That's just the point," said Ed Hardesty. "Any of you three would appreciate a trip to the Gulch, and the chances are that none of you would get back with my three hundred dollars. You'd drink it up or gamble it away. Joe is a kid I can trust."

This was on the order of a back-handed compliment but Joe Draper didn't mind. He grinned at the three men who wished they had drawn his assignment. They were older than he was. They were more experienced cattle-hands. Yet the boss had picked him and this indication of Hardesty's trust in him made Joe feel good.

"A four-day easy ride," Slim Carse grumbled. "A four-day vacation. We'll work you plenty when you get back, kid."

Joe chuckled. "I'll get back," he promised. "That's the point. Hang a lantern out for me four nights from now."

JOE DRAPER was nineteen. He was tall and so slender that some men called him "Skinny." He had a thick shock of sandy colored hair, mild blue eyes and a face generously splashed with freckles. For four years, now, he had been holding down a man's job. When he was only fifteen his parents had been killed, and ducking the dubious generosity of some distant relatives who had offered him a home, Joe had run away, heading west. He had been lucky. He had made it to Ludlow where Ed Hardesty had taken a fancy to him and had offered him a job.

During the four years he had spent with Hardesty, Joe Draper had learned a great deal. He could ride as well as any of the men on the Bar Anchor ranch. He could use a rope. He could handle almost any ranch job which was thrown at him. He was stronger than he looked. He might lack something in judgment and experience but he was still learning and he liked the work.

It was an easy drive north and west, through the Solana hills. By dark, Joe had the cattle penned up for the night in the old Watts' corral. He slept better than he had expected to and in the early morning dawn was on his way again, headed for the junction of Easter Creek and the Saw-Tooth river.

This was beyond the limits of the Bar Anchor ranch and was in the long shadows of the Tubec mountains. It was a rough

and rugged country. Joe had never before been up here and he worried, some, that he might lose the way. As a result, he pushed the cattle harder than was necessary and by mid-afternoon was at the appointed meeting place.

There was no one here to meet him but there was a road which seemed to follow the course of the Saw-Tooth River and which led into a wide canyon. Joe followed the road with his eyes. Two miles up the canyon, according to what he had heard, was the mouth of Dyer Gulch, and a mile up the gulch was the mining camp.

More than a thousand men, they had told him, had moved into the gulch and had staked their claims. Some had become millionaires overnight. Some could hardly wash up enough gold for a living. In the town which served the camp there were said to be more than fifty saloons and gambling halls.

There were half as many stores and eating houses and prices were out of sight. Five dollars for a good meal, fifty cents for a sack of tobacco, a dollar for a drink. It was no wonder that Mal Bolitho, who owned half of the town, could afford to pay thirty dollars a head for beef.

Joe thought about the town of Dyer Gulch and wished that he could have the opportunity to see it and spend some time there. He waved at the driver of a stage from Ludlow and two teamsters whose slower wagons followed the stage. In the late afternoon, just as he was beginning to worry about the men who were supposed to meet him, he saw four mounted horsemen coming down the canyon road. They splashed across the river above the Easter Creek junction and came on to meet him.

The leader of the four was a big-heavy-set man, black-bearded and hunched. He glanced at the browsing cattle, then turned his eyes on Joe Draper. He had dark, sharp eyes, deeply set in a scowling face. "Are these the critters we're supposed to get?" he asked, bluntly.

"They're for a man named Bolitho," Joe answered.

"They look pretty skinny to me," said the bearded man, "but I reckon they'll have to do. All right. We'll take 'em."

"Did you bring the money?" Joe asked.

"Money?" said the bearded man. "What money?"

Joe was aware of a sudden uneasiness. He held his voice steady. "I'm supposed to collect for 'em," he explained.

The bearded man laughed. It wasn't a friendly laugh. The sound of it sent a chill racing up and down Joe's spine.

"Collect for 'em?" said the bearded man. "Hell, kid. You ought to pay us to take them off your hands. Anyhow, I don't know anything about any money. Mal Bolitho just told us to come out here and get ten head of cattle he had bought."

"I'm supposed to get paid for 'em," Joe said stubbornly.

"Then maybe you'd better see Bolitho."

"Maybe you'd better go back and see Bolitho yourself," said Joe Draper. "Tell him he can have his cattle when I get paid three hundred dollars."

The bearded man's scowl grew deeper. His hand dropped to his gun. "See here, kid," he said sharply. "We're taking these cattle. So far as we're concerned, Mal Bolitho's bought 'em. If you want to make an argument out of it, go ahead."

Joe had never known a feeling like the one which gripped him now. It paralyzed his muscles. It blocked off his ability to think. He stared from the bearded man to the other three who had come with him. All four men were watching him closely. One had half drawn his gun, and was leaning forward.

He had the sudden notion that these men hoped he would make an argument and that if he did, they would shoot him down with no hesitation at all. Joe pulled in a long, slow breath. He tried to speak but he could get no words past the thick lump in his throat.

The bearded man laughed again and the sound of his laugh was ugly. "Round 'em up, Morey," he ordered. "Get 'em started up the road to the Gulch. Maybe we can get 'em butchered before Bolitho sees 'em and learns how he's been rooked. He ain't gonna like it."

"What about the kid?" asked the man who was probably named Morey.

"I'll handle the kid," said the bearded man. "You fellows get the cattle started for the Gulch."

JOE DRAPER sat quietly on his horse. He watched the there men round up the cattle and start them across the shallow river. He wondered what Slim Carse would do if Carse were in his place, or Tex Andrews or one of the other Bar Anchor riders. He was wearing a gun. He had learned to use it but he had never before been in a place where he had had to use it on another man. He was cold with perspiration.

"All right, kid," said the bearded man suddenly. "Get started."

"Get started," said Joe Draper. "Where?"

"Back to where you came from."

Joe bit his lips. He shook his head. "I want the money. I want the three hundred dollars."

The bearded man drew his gun. His eyes had narrowed. There was an ugly, twisted look on his face. "I had hoped I wouldn't have to do this," Joe heard him saying.

The man's hand was tightening on the gun. He was going to shoot. Joe's spurs raked the flanks of his horse and he jerked on the reins. His horse plunged forward. He heard the roar of a shot and felt a stinging pain scrape his side. He heard another shot, a shot from the gun he had drawn without being aware of it. Then he was past the bearded man and his horse was racing away.

He looked back over his shoulder. The bearded man was down and those who had been driving the cattle had turned and were coming after him. A shot screamed above his head and then another and then a third. Joe crouched low over the saddle and urged his horse on. He looked back again. The men who had been following him had lost ground and even as he looked, they pulled up.

Joe let his horse run for another mile, then reined in and stared again in the direction of the junction of Easter Creek and the Saw-Tooth River. He could not tell what was happening back there. The trees bordering the river hid the men and the cattle from his view. He didn't know how badly the bearded man had been hit. He lifted a hand to his face and mopped his brow. He was perspiring. He was trembling. He felt shaky. He drew his gun and looked at it and then shuddered and dropped it back in its holster. After a moment, feeling that the men at the junction might still be watching him, he rode on, heading in the general direction of the Bar Anchor ranch.

THE sun had dropped down behind the Tubec mountains and an early dusk spread across the sky. Joe Draper hadn't ridden far. He had swung over toward the hills maybe two miles below the Saw-Tooth River canyon. The scratch on his side, made by the bearded man's bullet, was a constant reminder of how narrowly he had escaped. It wasn't deep and it had stopped bleeding, but it still pained him.

Joe measured the thickening shadows and tried to plan ahead. He could return to the ranch and tell his story. Ed Hardesty, he knew, would believe him and Hardesty would do what had to be done. To return to the ranch was the sensible thing to do, but the more he thought of it the more he knew he couldn't follow that course.

He had been given a job to do. He had been sent up here with ten head of cattle.

He had been supposed to collect for them and return with the money, not empty handed and with an excuse. He at least owed it to Ed Hardesty to see Mal Bolitho before he returned. He owed Hardesty more than that. He owed Hardesty a job well done. Hardesty had picked him for this mission and was depending on him.

From the supplies he carried in his saddle bags, Joe had a cold and tasteless evening meal. It was quite dark when he finished but the stars were out in a cloudless sky and soon there would be a moon. It was time to get started. It was time to head for Dyer Gulch. He had been told not to go there, but there was now no way to avoid it.

The road was easy to find and easy to follow up the canyon. It was marked by the heavy travel of the many men who had come here seeking their fortune. Joe Draper didn't hurry. He came to the turn up Dyer Gulch, and soon after that to the first straggling shelters of the camp.

Here, in the trees just off the road, he tied his horse. A man walking, Joe had decided, would be less conspicuous than a man on horseback, and Joe had no desire to be conspicuous. He moved on up the gulch and around the first bend came to a shack which was set close to the road. In the shack's open doorway a man was sitting, smoking a cigar. Joe stopped. He nodded to the man. He mentioned that it was a nice night.

The man chuckled. He said, "Yep, it's a nice night, son. Men haven't yet figured out a way to mess up the heavens, but one of these days they will."

"How much farther to the town?" Joe asked.

"It starts just around the next bend," answered the man in the doorway, "an' it runs on for a mile or more—if by the town you mean the saloons, the gambling tents and the cribs which infest the place."

"I didn't mean exactly that," said Joe Draper.

"Then what did you mean?"

"Where would I be likely to find a man named Mal Bolitho?"

"Are you a friend of his?"

Joe shook his head. "Nope. I just want to see him."

"Do you know who he is?"

"Not exactly."

"Well," said the man in the doorway, "Bolitho just about runs this town. He owns most of the saloons and gambling tents. He owns most of the stores. He owns the freight line which runs in here. If he runs into any trouble he's got a crowd of rough-necks on his payroll to back him up. The only nice thing about Mal Bolitho is his looks. He's a right respectable looking man."

"Father," said a girl's voice from the darkness of the room beyond the doorway. "You shouldn't say such things. You don't know whom you're talking to."

Those words were whispered but Joe heard them. The man in the doorway gave his chuckle. He said, "What of it, Myra? Bolitho knows what I think of him. So do half of the men in the Gulch."

"Did some cattle come up this road a while ago?" Joe asked.

"Yep. Ten head. They were driven by three of Bolitho's men. Tomorrow in the stores we'll start buying beef at fifty times what it's worth. Where are you from, son?"

"The Bar Anchor ranch," said Joe. "It's in the valley south of Ludlow."

"You didn't walk in here."

"I left my horse down the road a piece."

"What do you want with Bolitho?"

"He owes me for those cattle."

The man in the doorway got to his feet. He was tall, slender, a little stooped. He peered at Joe Draper. He said, "Look here, son. Don't go buckin' Bolitho alone. You wouldn't have a chance. If he's got ten head of your cattle, write 'em off the books. What are ten head of cattle against a man's life?"

"They weren't my cattle," said Joe. "I was just delivering them. I was supposed to collect for them. That's why I've got to see Bolitho."

The girl who had warned her father against talking appeared now in the doorway. Joe couldn't see her face clearly. He couldn't tell what she looked like. She whispered something to her father and the man nodded.

He said, "Myra tells me the coffee's still warm. How about stopping in for a cup? My name's Alcott. Andy Alcott."

Joe would have liked a cup of coffee but he had a feeling that if he stopped this girl and her father would try to talk him out of seeing Bolitho. That was his first responsibility, to see Bolitho and to collect three hundred dollars.

"I may stop in on the way back," he answered. "Thanks, just the same."

He moved on, then, and though Alcott called after him he didn't turn back.

THE road became a street, a twisting, narrow, uneven street flanked on either side by tents and shacks and here and there a more substantial frame building. There were no board walks, no porches, no tie-rails with the usual string of horses. In the rainy season the muck of this street would make it almost impassable, but these were the dry months and the dirt and sand was ankle deep.

Joe passed three men and then another group and then was well into what Andy Alcott had called the town. From some of the lighted tents he passed there came the sound of music, from one saloon the noise of a brawl.

There was a constant movement up and down the street as men traveled from one bar or gambling tent to another. Some were men dressed much as he was, cowhands from the range trying their luck at mining. Most men, he noticed, wore guns.

He made two inquiries for Mal Bolitho and both times was directed to the Silver Dollar saloon, "on up the street." He walked until he came to it, and for a moment, then, he stood outside and studied the building, and considered what he would do.

The Silver Dollar was the largest building he had yet seen in Dyer Gulch. It was a frame structure with a false front and a sign which extended from over the door into the street. Men were constantly moving through the door, entering or leaving the saloon.

Joe touched the gun which he was wearing. He hoped he wouldn't have to use it. He decided that the thing to do was just go in and ask Bolitho for the three hundred dollars. Three hundred dollars, he figured, wasn't much money for a man to make an issue over, especially a man like Bolitho.

Joe moved on up to the door and pushed his way into the saloon. The place was crowded. There was a bar at one side, deep-lined by miners. Gambling tables occupied the rest of the space in the building. There were crowds around each table. The saloon was a bedlam of noise and the air was heavy with smoke and the smell of perspiration. A dozen lamps suspended from the rafters furnished an inadequate light.

Joe Draper edged his way into the room. He caught sight of a back door and above it a sign which read: OFFICE. When he reached the door he read the sign on it. PRIVATE. DO NOT ENTER. Joe knocked on the door. He could hear no answer. He tried the knob. The door was unlocked. He pushed it open, stepped into the back room, and closed it behind him.

This back room was not very large. It was equipped with a table, several chairs and a desk. A lamp hung above the desk. Behind the desk a man was sitting, a big man, broad shouldered. He had dark, curly hair, a square-jawed face.

He looked up from the books he was working over and a scowl darkened his

eyes. "What's the matter?" he growled. "Can't you read? There was a sign on the door."

"I can read," said Joe Draper. "Is your name Bolitho?"

The man nodded. "What do you want?"

"I want three hundred dollars," said Joe. "I want the money for the cattle I delivered to your men."

Bolitho's eyes widened. He pushed back his chair. "So that's who you are?" he gasped. "You're the fellow who shot Bill Toohey."

"I shot a man who tried to shoot me," Joe admitted.

"You murdered him," said Bolitho. "You didn't even give him a chance to go for his gun."

Joe shook his head. "That's not true. He tried to kill me. He had his gun out. He fired first."

"That's not the story I got from the other men."

JOE shrugged his shoulders. "I don't care what story you got from the other men, Mr. Bolitho. Right now I don't care much about anything but the three hundred dollars I was supposed to collect for the cattle. I want it. I want that money. I want the three hundred dollars."

Bolitho came to his feet. "Toohey paid it to you," he snapped.

"He didn't," said Joe Draper. "If he had paid it to me there wouldn't have been any trouble. I wouldn't be here. It's because he didn't pay it to me that I've come to you."

"And you expect me to hand it to you again?"

"Not again, Mr. Bolitho. I told you I didn't get the money. I want it."

Mal Bolitho's hand dropped to the gun holstered at his side, but he didn't draw it. He hadn't been quick enough. Joe's gun was out and was covering him.

"I didn't want to have to do this," said Joe Draper, "but there seems to be no other way. I'll take the three hundred dollars."

Bolitho gulped. His hand fell away from his gun. He shook his head. "You'll never get away with this," he declared. "You'll never get out through that saloon. You haven't a chance, kid. You'd better put up that gun and talk this over sensibly."

"There's nothing to talk over," said Joe. "You owe me three hundred dollars for ten head of cattle. I want it. Hand it over."

"I don't have that much on me," said Bolitho.

"Look and see," Joe suggested. "And don't take too much time. I'm not used to handling a gun. I might get nervous."

Bolitho eyed the door. Muffled sounds from the saloon drifted into this room. Bolitho had men out there who would help him if they knew he needed help, but right now they might as well have been a thousand miles away.

He had no way of calling them in. He reached for his wallet and thumbed it open. He counted out three hundred dollars and laid it on the desk. His eyes lifted to Joe's face. They had narrowed. They were a hard and almost violent look in them.

Joe Draper grinned. He stepped forward and picked it up. He said, "Thanks, Mr. Bolitho."

For a moment, Joe glanced at the money he was holding and in that moment, Bolitho's hand slapped down on his holster and whipped up his gun. Out of the corner of his eye, Joe caught the motion of Bolitho's arm. He saw Bolitho's gun lifting toward him and he fired and heard the roar of Bolitho's gun merging with his own.

Where Bolitho's shot went he didn't know, but it didn't touch him. He stepped back. Bolitho's gun slipped from his hand and the man clutched at his stomach. A hoarse, half-scream burst from Bolitho's throat. The man rocked forward. He fell heavily across the desk.

There was a sudden hammering on the door. Joe glanced that way. He knew what would happen next. The door would open and men from the saloon would come charging in. He wouldn't have the ghost of a chance against them. There wasn't even time to get out the window. Even now the door was opening.

Joe tilted his gun toward the lamp and fired, blasting the glass chimney and snuffing out the light. He turned his gun toward the opening door and sent three more shots screaming into the saloon, high shots, high above the heads of the men.

For a moment they backed off. For a moment they hesitated about charging into a rain of bullets and that moment was enough. Joe holstered his gun. He grabbed up a chair and smashed it against the curtained window. He climbed through and stumbled away in the darkness. Shots streaked after him but none were even close.

A man coming up the street stopped near where Joe was hidden. "Hey," he called to someone. "What happened at the Silver Dollar?"

"Wally Patterson shot Bolitho," came the answer. "They caught Patterson out back. I reckon they'll string him up."

"It's no more than he deserves," said the first man.

He moved on up the street.

Joe Draper scowled. This wasn't something he had figured on. This was something he wished he hadn't heard. He wondered who Patterson was and why the men who had caught him thought he had killed Bolito. He told himself that Patterson would probably be able to prove he hadn't shot the saloon keeper. He got to his feet, stepped out on the street and started away. He took maybe a dozen steps, then stopped.

A man came up behind him and touched him on the shoulder. A voice said, "Hello, son. I've been looking for you."

Joe turned and recognized Andy Alcott.

"A man named Patterson just shot Bolitho," said Andy Alcott. "I don't know who you can see now about the money he owes you. Let's go back to the house and talk about it."

"What will happen to Patterson?" Joe asked.

"Who cares? Patterson was one of Bolitho's hired killers. He did what often happens. He turned on his boss. He deserves what he'll get a dozen times over."

Joe Draper rubbed his jaw. His scowl had grown deeper. He wanted to believe what Alcott had just told him. He had a feeling that Alcott was honest and just.

"Come on," said Alcott. "We'll have that cup of coffee."

He took Joe's arm and they moved on down the street but before they had gone far, Joe pulled to a stop. He said, "Let's go back, Mr. Alcott. I've got to see Patterson."

THE Silver Dollar saloon was really jammed but the men there were more quiet than Joe had expected. The games had stopped. Above the restless movement of feet Joe could hear the low murmur of voices. Alcott recognized someone he knew and asked what had happened.

"The trial's over, if you could call it that," answered the man. "Someone's gone for a rope. Patterson's going to swing. If it was anyone else—" The man's voice broke off. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Where's Patterson?" Joe asked.

"At the end of the bar. Two men are holding him up. They had to. He's too drunk to stand by himself. It's a mystery to me how he managed to handle a gun."

Joe pushed forward until he could see the prisoner. Patterson was thin, stoop-shouldered, bleary-eyed, unshaven, dirty. His mouth hung open. There was a dazed, uncomprehending look on his face. It was doubtful that he knew what was happening. Joe mopped a hand over his forehead. He reached for his gun. He drew it. He

covered the two men who were holding Patterson.

"Turn him loose," he said sharply. "Patterson didn't kill Bolitho. I did. There will have to be a new trial."

He had spoken louder than he realized. His voice lifted above the murmuring voices in the room. A sudden and abrupt silence swept over the place, and into this silence, Andy Alcott spoke.

"French! Noble! Sam Wilson! Over here with me. You heard what was just said. There'll be a new trial and this time it'll be on the square."

Andy Alcott's gun was out and he was over against the wall near the end of the bar. He was facing the room, anticipating and ready for any trouble Bolitho's men might start. Three men joined him and then three more. This group formed a wall between Joe and the rest of the room.

More men crowded forward and joined these. There was a sudden lift in the talk throughout the room. Andy Alcott climbed up on the bar. "You would have hung an innocent man," he roared. "Aren't you proud of it? A fine bunch of men you are. Before we hang any one in this town, after this, we get the facts and all the facts, and anyone who doesn't like it can get out."

The trial was brief and was quickly over. Joe told his story. Bolitho's gun was brought forward and examined. It had recently been fired. An examination of Bolitho's office disclosed where the bullet had gone and how narrowly it had missed Joe, who had stood in front of Bolitho's desk. The jury's verdict was that Joe had fired in self-defense.

It was a popular verdict for it was more than a verdict. It was a declaration for decent government by the men who lived in Dyer's Gulch. It was a warning to what was left of Bolitho's crowd not to try and take over where he had stopped.

Much later, Joe walked down the street with Andy Alcott. "We'll have that coffee," said Alcott. "Myra will still be up. You can stop over with us if you want to."

"I'll have to ride on," said Joe. "I'm going to be late getting back to the ranch, anyhow."

"You know, Myra and I won't be here much longer," said Andy Alcott. "My claim is about worked out. When we leave here we'll be heading back to the ranch. It's near Cedar Crossing. That's not too far from Ludlow. Why don't you ride over, sometime, and see us?"

Andy shrugged. He was still thinking of the trial and of the narrow margin by which he had escaped. He didn't see the larger thing which the trial had accomplished. "Maybe I will ride over some day," he said vaguely.

"You haven't met Myra yet," Andy chuckled. "I reckon we'll be seeing you."

TWO days later, just at noon, Joe Draper rode up to the Bar Anchor ranch house. He tied his horse to the corral fence and went inside. He handed Ed Hardesty the three hundred dollars.

Hardesty counted the money and shoved it into his pocket. "Any trouble?"

Joe Draper shook his head. "Not much."

"The boys need you in the south meadow," said Hardesty.

Joe nodded. He turned and headed for the door. Then he looked back at Hardesty.

"In a couple of months," he said slowly, "I'm going to have a few days off."

"Why?" asked Hardesty.

"I want to ride over to Cedar Crossing."

"For Pete's sake, why?"

"I just want to ride over there. That's all."

Ed Hardesty frowned, then shrugged his shoulders. "Talk to me about it in two months," he suggested.

"Don't worry," said Joe Draper. "I will."

The RIPROARIOUS WEST

BY Robbins and Farren

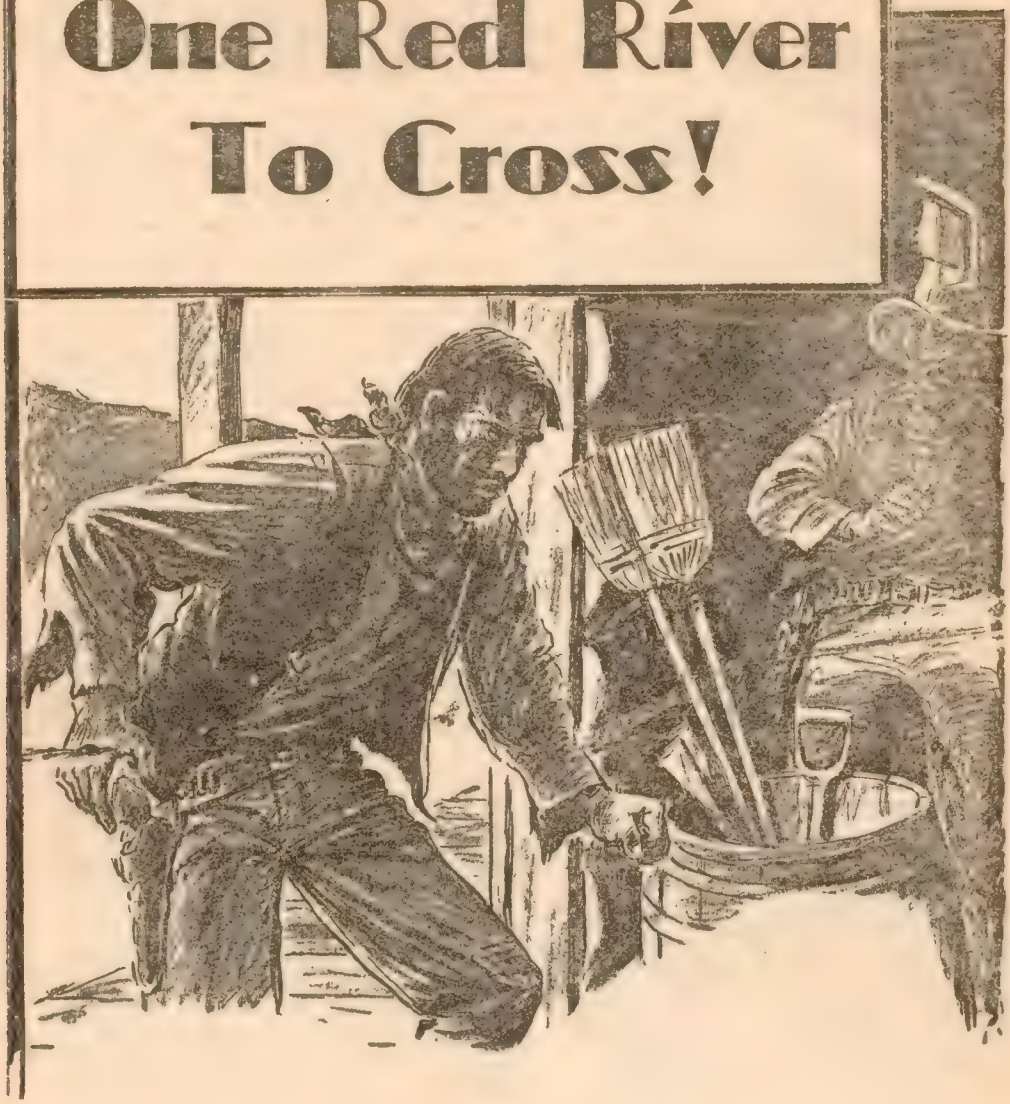
A bucket of blue paint once saved the life of the famous "long trail" cowpoke, Paul Fitzpatrick. Late in life he went to work for a ranch in Apache country and held down a lonely line camp thirty miles from help. One day, returning from a ride hot and dusty, he picked up a bucket of water to pour over his body. Too late, he realized that he had grabbed the wrong bucket and that he was covered from head to foot with blue paint. At the same moment, a war party of Indians charged into his front yard. At the sight of the dripping, blue, naked figure in the doorway, however, their cries changed to howls of alarm and the redskins ran.

Chris Swenson was a Norwegian who was expert in the ancient art of finding well water with a divining rod. Hearing that water was scarce and valued in Texas he journeyed there to make his fortune. But the dry sands of the Lone Star State were too much even for Swenson's magic peach stick. He never found a well in Texas. Nevertheless, he made himself a nice career—his divining rod, which located water in the old country, was used to find small deposits of precious metal in the new!

One of the most sensational arrests ever made by famed sheriff Wyatt Earp was the result of an April Fool's Day prank. Pete Rester, a bandit killer, and his gang of ten to a dozen men were in hiding—no one knew where. On April 1, 1879, a bunch of small boys, stifling their giggles, told Earp that they had spotted Rester's gang in Bryant Canyon, a deep gash in the earth, fifteen miles to the south of Pima County. Although it was a stormy day, Earp and his posse rode out. They became confused and rode fifteen miles north instead. There they found another, smaller, canyon and, inside it, all the members of the fugitive Rester gang, who promptly surrendered.

Poor Elmer Conklin was perennial candidate at every election ever held in the town of New Panamint. He ran for everything from Alderman to dogcatcher but was never elected. Finally, the populace, feeling sorry for him, elected him Mayor. Conklin was beside himself with joy—for about twenty-four hours. Then someone reported the great gold strike at Rhyolite and the entire population decamped overnight, leaving Mayor Conklin to administer the affairs of a wholly deserted village.

One Red River To Cross!



CHAPTER ONE

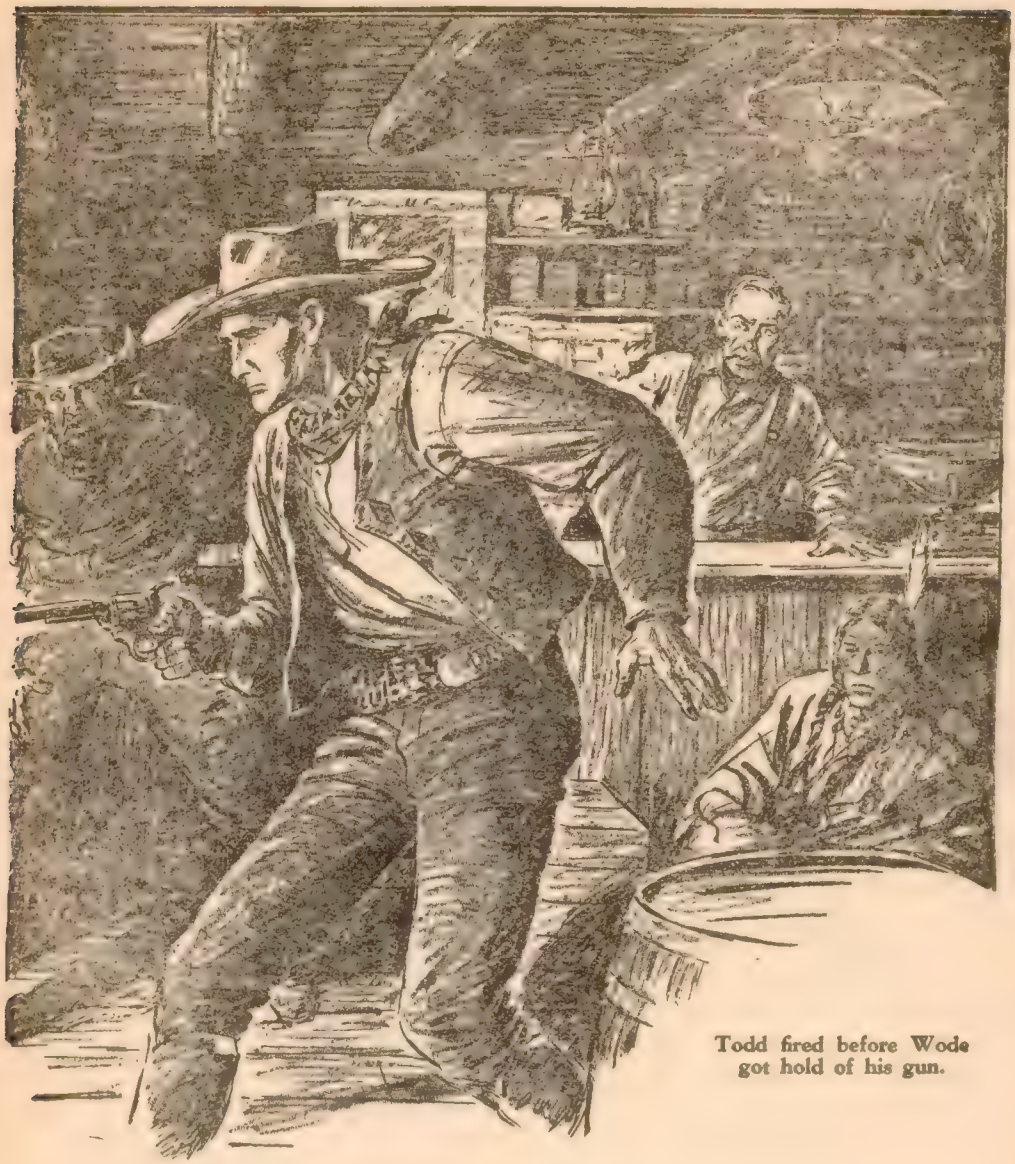
Head 'Em for San Antone!

TALKING to Tom Doan, who ran Doan's Store on the Red River Crossing to Dodge, Cal Todd mentioned that he was bound for San Antone, and that the only cow he ever wanted to see again would be in pieces on his plate.

"I don't like Comanches, and I don't like sand between my teeth or water in my boots. I don't like beans and biscuits, and, above all, I don't like cows. What the hell am I doing around here anyway? I'm on my way to San Antone."

He was tall, and smooth-skinned, and outfitted himself and his horse in noth-

Trail-Drive Novel By MARVIN DE VRIES



Todd fired before Wode got hold of his gun.

The bloodied I.O.U. for the sold-out trail herd rode in the buckskin jacket pocket of Cal Todd, hard-eyed drifter from San Antone. . . . And —figured that crew of hardcase gunmen—nothing could make a neater bull's-eye!

ing but the best. The only piece of outright foofooraw he allowed himself was a bear-tooth necklace around his neck. Each tooth was tinted a different color, and brightly polished—a piece of Indian work he'd come by in some outlandish way.

"San Antone," Doan sighed, straightening some tinned goods on a shelf. "That's a place."

"Flowers," Todd went on. "Cool drinks in the evening. Music. I like to sing a song. Señoritas."

"Ah," Doan breathed. "Señoritas!"

Todd grinned sardonically. "Why don't you close up this dump and come along?"

Doan bristled. "This ain't no dump."

"Well, hell-hole then." Todd's grin widened. Doan was starchy about the kind of place he ran.

"It ain't no hell-hole," he snapped back. "I get some queer customers, and when them Texas outfits git tied up by high water like now, some hell is bound to pop. But I ain't got a hell-hole. You got a hell-hole when you try to trim everybody that comes along. I don't do that."

"No, I know it," Todd admitted, and laughed until Doan knew he'd been baited.

Trade picked up. Some came in to loaf, some to buy. Doan knew them all. The only one he spoke to uncivilly was a renegade by the name of Bugsy Wode, who had a simple, half-witted look. Doan didn't consider him half as witless as he looked.

A Comanche squaw came in wanting a bolt of red cloth, but Doan shook his head, making talk with his hands, saying he couldn't spare a whole bolt. He said he'd sell her some off the piece. She shook her head stubbornly, wanting the whole bolt. They did considerable good-natured haggling. Doan, seeing her condition, said he'd let her have enough to make all the baby clothes she wanted, but he wouldn't let her have a whole bolt. He had to dole it out because it was scarce.

Bugsy Wode, who, until now, had paid no attention to the talk, suddenly let out an angry snarl, and told Doan to give her the whole bolt. "Give it to her, you old fool," he stormed. "I'll tell Sam you wouldn't sell her nothin'."

Doan smiled wearily. "Your brother Sam don't scare me a bit, Bugsy," he said. "He rods as ungoldly a bunch of hellers as I ever set eyes on, but he don't scare me."

"He'll slit your throat if you cross me, Doan."

"I'm her every day in the week, and I try to accommodate everybody. I'll give this woman a piece of this goods, but—"

"Give her the bolt."

"If you want her to have it you'll pay for it. She's your squaw, ain't she?"

"I'm not payin' for nothin'," Bugsy growled. "Sam Wode's my brother. Besides I'm getting me a new girl, a white one. Sam promised me."

"Who kin that be?" Doan asked.

"Kerry Walden. She owns a piece of the Lazy W." He rolled his tongue over his lips. "Godamighty, she's a daisy. I seen her last night over to the Lazy W camp down the river."

"I reckon she fell right into your arms."

"She never seen me. I played poker with her kid brother out there on the sly. God's sake, he was an easy mark. Look what I got off'n him." He reached in his pocket, and got out a piece of tally-book paper which he showed around, puffing his chest. Doan saw the paper, and so did Todd.

"I.O.U." it read. "My share Lazy W stock, in kind, or cash, at Dodge, whichever. Signed, William Walden. (Bub)."

"Cripes, did I git into him," Wode bragged. "Cash and stock."

"Then I reckon you kin pay for this yard goods," Doan said dryly.

"The hell with it. I won't pay for nothin'. I don't want her no more. I'm finished with her."

DOAN put the bolt back on the shelf, and when the woman protested, he told her to argue it out with Wode. Scared but stubborn, she approached the yellow-toothed renegade, touching him timidly on the sleeve. She spoke to him with soft words. A lot of it was in sign that Cal Todd could understand. She was going to have a child, and she wanted something pretty from a store.

"I can't understand a damn' thing you say," Wode lied. "Go off and learn yourself some English." Suddenly, his temper flared out of control, and his voice rose to a shriek. "Now git outa here, and don't come back. I'm sick of yuh. I don't want to never set eyes on you no more. Git!"

When she didn't move, he let fly with his boot, and kicked her down.

"Out!" Doan roared at Wode, leveling his finger as if he were throwing a knife. "Out!"

"Oh, shut your big trap!" Wode blustered.

Todd grabbed him by the neck and the seat of his pants, and tip-toed him to the door. "We choose our customers here, mister," he stated, "and we choose the squaw instead of you. Git."

Bugsy Wode flailed his arms like a windmill. He wore a gun, but he didn't try to reach it. Instead, he had a knife up his sleeve, and when Todd gave him a shove, he twisted around, getting his back against the door frame before he went through. Knife in hand, he leaped at Todd.

"Look out!" Doan yelled.

Todd spun, and his lean frame twisted and bent, effortlessly and fast, so the knife slid past his ribs like a snake's tongue. The steam Wode put behind the blow took him halfway across the room. Then he twisted again, and threw the weapon, but it slid past Todd's ear, going into a log.

Wode dived for his gun, but Todd fired before he got it out, shattering his hand. Wode screamed and went for his gun, but the minute he touched it pain stabbed him again, and his hand shot out as if it had been blown off. He ranted and raved his way out the door.

Doan sucked in his breath, and wiped his face with his sleeve. A pair of buffalo hunters, smelling to high heaven, stared at Todd approvingly. An Indian, sitting cross-legged on the floor, blinked his eyes, but didn't move. Todd watched through the door.

Wode climbed a horse, spooking off toward the breaks along the river, raking it raw with his rusty spurs. The squaw got to her feet, breathing hard, her eyes still fixed on the bolt of cloth.

"Damn it, Doan," Todd muttered, "give it to her, the whole bolt. I'll pay for it."

Doan gave him a rueful grin, and handed down the bolt. "All right," he said. "And I'll go you one better. Injun, you go see. Talk to Little Hand. Tell him to take her back. Tell him I say so. Tell him Little Hand come to store. I give him good trade."

The Indian on the floor grunted, but didn't move. Doan understood him to say he would, and he let it stand. A man must do things in his own fashion, and in his own time.

"That bugger Wode makes me sweat," Doan growled peevishly. "Sam, his brother, is onreasonable about him, too. He'll come here burnin' up."

"Send him to me," Todd said.

"Damned if I won't," Doan muttered. "I'll send him clear down to San Antone after you."

A drizzle was just letting up, and they went outside together for some air. Todd took the knife out of the log as he went past and put it in his belt.

"I wish you'd light out pronto, Todd," Doan said, anxiously. "Them Wodes are bad medicine. One's crazy,

and the other's snake-mean. They pull some of the damndest shenanigans around here. Buyin' that squaw was one, and gettin' rid of her another. She's a daughter of Little Hand, who's a Comanche subchief.

"The old bugger traded her off for a bunch of horses, but when he hears she's been kicked around he'll have a fit. He'd have killed Bugsy long ago, except an Injun don't like to put a club to an idiot. And I reckon he's scared some to tangle with Sam."

"What about that I.O.U. he showed us?" Todd asked.

"Lord, I don't know. I bet I ain't seen the last of that. I know the Waldens."

"Can he play poker good enough to get into somebody like that?"

Doan nodded sourly. "He kin play poker, I will say that. There's five Walden kids, and if he got Bub's share, he's won himself close to twenty thousand dollars. Mebbe you could buy it off'n him at a reasonable figure."

"Who says I've got any cash?"

DOAN grinned a little sheepishly. "I know most everything that goes on, Todd, from Dodge to San Antone. I ain't nosy, but it gets told to me. You bought stock on spec, and hit the market just right, and made a fortune. You've got fifty thousand banked down in Austin, and you've got twenty thousand in your money belt. Right?"

Todd laughed suddenly, and said: "Well, I'll be damned." Then he fingered his bear-tooth necklace, and watched the cloudy sky. "What about that Walden girl?" he asked, finally. "What's she doing out here?"

"Ridin' herd on her brothers."

"She ought to get spanked and sent back home."

Hoofbeats pounded up the slope, and they both turned to dook.

There were two riders. One of them was a girl, her hat gone, her blond hair flying in the wind. The boy was the length of his horse ahead of her, yelling his head off—half in fright, half in sheer devilment. Every so often she charged him like a hornet, and took a whack at him with her quirt.

When the boy saw it coming he went down to one side, like an Indian. Finally Todd saw him grab the stubby whip and throw it away.

"There they are," Doan groaned. "I better go board up my winders."

The two riders came to the hitch rail neck and neck, pulling up in a swirl of mud. The boy's face was twisted with outraged fury, but it was easy to see he was blood brother to the girl.

"Lay off, Kerry," he yelled as he came down. "What d'you think I am, a damn' horse? Ow!"

"You climb that horse, Bub Walden, and get back to camp pronto," she ordered.

"I won't do it," Bub Walden yelled back at her. "Go ahead, beat me to death. See if I care." He dived under the hitch rack and went for the door.

The girl grabbed her rope, dropped it around him before he got out of reach. Then she started hauling him back like a calf to the branding. "I'll rope-haul you all the way back," she warned. "I will. I purely will."

"You see what I mean?" Doan mumbled.

A grin spread across Todd's face. He got out Bugsy Wode's knife, took a step forward toward the taut rope, and slit it in two.

"My God!" Doan groaned in horror.

Boy and girl turned on Todd like wildcats. "So, mister," the boy flared, stepping out of the loop. "I'll learn you to keep outa somethin' that ain't none of your mix."

"It's what you wanted," Todd spoke up.

"How the hell you know what I want?" Bub Walden snapped.

"My rope!" the girl wailed, hauling in the cut end.

"Look out for the girl!" Doan yelled at Todd.

The warning came too late. The girl got the loose end of the rope off the ground, doubled it up in her hand, and brought it down over Todd's head. He turned to face her, and then the boy came at him from the other side and popped him with his fist.

"I'll learn you," he yelped again.

Todd couldn't back out of it. They wouldn't let him, although the girl looked flustered because of the crowd. If he could get the boy off his back, he could probably make his peace with the girl. He let the boy get in one more good wallop, and then he started to back off to give the kid a break.

"That's enough, son," he protested. "I've had enough."

But Bub Walden wouldn't take the hint. He let fly again, and this time Todd stopped him with his fist, a stunning blow that exploded in his face like dynamite. Bub Walden staggered back, struck his head against the store wall, and sagged down senseless.

Shame and distress because of the crowd suddenly flayed the girl, and she quit, blinded with tears.

"I reckon you want him back in camp," Todd remarked. "Seems as if I heard it mentioned."

She nodded soundlessly, and Todd piled the limp figure on his horse. Then he climbed on behind.

"Lead the way, ma'am," he told her, turning to wait.

"I don't like to bother you," she protested.

"It's no bother," he answered. "I'm on my way to San Antone anyway." Then his voice got too small to hear. "I think."

CHAPTER TWO

Blood on Red River

THE orphan Waldens—Kerry, Rick, Randie, Bren, and Bub—owned the Lazy W. They had four thousand head of stock in their drive. They'd been held up ten days. Kerry, the girl, was the oldest. Rick was a year younger.

Randie and Bren were twins, and Bub was the youngest. In looks they were all out of the same pod, with high color and daring eyes. Their folks had died in a Mississippi packet boat race five years ago. Kerry was Bub's legal guardian, but he claimed he had come of age on the drive and that she couldn't tell him anything. She claimed he was a year ahead of himself, and Rick was inclined to agree.

"She could tell you to go lay an egg," he told Bub, "and you'd at least have to try."

"I'd lay this one on my nose right down on the ground if anybody kin tell me how," Bub stated, glaring at Todd.

"You still ain't told us why you was in such an all-fired hurry to get to Doan's Store," Rick prodded some more.

"Nobody's business," Bub stated.

"You know you need your sleep," Kerry stated. "You look like you're bleeding to death out of your eyes. Up all night. The only reason I told you you had to stay in camp was for your own good."

"Oh, God!" Bub's lips formed the words, but it was a soundless exclamation.

"Come on, speak up, or I'll clout you," Rick said.

"I went to kill a skunk," Bub let go finally. "My own private skunk. Now shut up, all of you, or I'll light out again, and I'll never come back."

"Would his name be Bugsy Wode?" Todd put in.

Bud Walden shrank like wilting lettuce.

"Bull's-eye!" Bren yelled. "Good for you, mister."

Todd didn't feel proud for butting in, but he knew the facts about the I.O.U. Something had to be done before Bub got himself into a worse mess than he was in now. Bub himself was almost in hysterics about it.

"How did you know?" Randie, the other twin, put in.

"I heard the jigger mention Bub's name, that's all." Todd figured he could do more with this in private.

"I'll fix you," Bub threw at him.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Kerry announced. "He's our new trailboss."

"What?" Todd, surprised as any of them at the announcement, joined in.

"But you promised!" Kerry insisted.

Todd grinned suddenly at this outright, bald-faced lie. The statement was ridiculous. She dared him to call her bluff, at the same time begging him not to. He was sitting close to her, and he put his hand on her knee, man to man, and held it there while he looked into her eyes.

What he saw, looking at her long and steadily, touched something in his heart, and melted it. Cows or no cows, he thought, water in my boots, sand in my grub, I'm licked. But he didn't tell her he was licked. He didn't tell her he would stay. Possibly by morning he would get his senses back and ride on.

"Take your hand off'n her," Bub spoke up, savagely. "Quirt him, Kerry."

"I lost my quirt," Kerry said, flushing a little, sudden mischief in her eyes.

"Clear out," Bub snapped. "I don't like to see a man leaning on a woman's knee, leering in her eyes."

BREN let out a yelp, and pointed to an open spot in the greenery along the creek. Todd turned. A party of Indians came out of the willows, and rode toward them. He counted nine riders, with a chief decked out in wild foofooraw.

"Little Hand," Rick breathed. "He's been here before. He wants wo-haw."

"I'll shoot the buzzard," Bren snapped.

Little Hand blandly ignored all of them except Cal Todd. One of his hands was withered to the size of a baby's, and he was specially proud of it, waving it around like a limp flag. His riders formed a half-circle behind him while he dismounted. He came in on foot. Todd wondered if he had already gotten Doan's message.

Little Hand, speaking a barnyard Spanish which Todd understood, spared them the usual circumlocutions, and announced gravely that he had come to thank Todd for killing his son-in-law, Bugsy Wode.

"Tolani has come home. She has a little one. It is well. We know what this man did to her in the store. We thank you for taking her part, and shooting him."

"Did he say Wode was dead?" Bub Walden broke in, holding his breath.

Todd nodded. He suspected there was more to this than met the eye, and decided to let it be the way Little Hand laid it down. Little Hand had the reputation of being a cagy old rascal. He might be playing a cunning game of his own. Or he might be grateful for what Todd had done in the store. Wode had been very much alive when Todd went out the door.

"How do you know he's dead?" he asked.

"Did I not spit on his dead face?" he remarked, spitting again with violent contempt. His glance strayed briefly to the new scalp at his waist, and when Todd saw what was hanging there, he knew Little Hand was playing a game of his own.

It was Bugsy Wode's scalp. Little Hand himself had killed him. Possibly he was frightened at what he had done, frightened of Sam Wode's vengeance, maybe he was trying to push the blame onto Todd, at the same time warning him how matters stood to ease his conscience.

"He bad man," Little Hand went on. "You shoot him. We thank you. We are brothers."

"Who said I killed him?"

"With his last breath a man gives tongue to the name of his killer," Little Hand murmured blandly. He stepped a little closer and put his good hand on Todd's shoulder, making a cermony of his gratitude, touching noses, slitting skin and mixing blood, the buck behind him making a sing-song hub-bub while it was going on.

Todd endured it patiently. Once he thought the old rascal was lifting his tobacco sack out of his pocket, but it was still there when the ceremony was over. There was something more besides—the same piece of tally-book paper Bugsy Wode had showed around in Doan's Store. Bub Walden's big I.O.U.

Todd kept it out of sight. There was some cunning idea behind Little Hand's play. He knew the value of the piece of paper. Todd was being bought—the I.O.U. for the risk of owning up to killing Bugsy Wode, and bringing down on his head Sam Wode's howling vengeance. It was something to think about, all right. Something to worry about.

"I didn't catch half of it," Rick told Todd after Little Hand and his bucks had ridden off. "I will say you kin rod this outfit straight to hell, and I'll trail along. That jigger had me worried no end, and now it looks like we're in the clear as long as we hang onto you. That was some touching doings."

Todd shrugged. "When you look too hard at one thing you sometimes miss something else," he remarked. "Did you ever think of that?"

BUB WALDEN made no comments, but he had a half-stunned look on his face. Something new was boiling in his brain. He prowled around, restless and uneasy, for about an hour, and finally rode off by himself toward the bedground.

Kerry stared after him, and started to fret again, watching the open ground that sloped up toward Doan's Store. Bub didn't show himself in that direction.

"Do you know what's eating him?" Todd finally asked.

She shook her head. "All I know is, he's got a conniption of some kind."

"Why don't you let him work it out his own way." Todd told her. "I can tell you this much: he's in the clear already, even if he doesn't know it."

A weight lifted off her shoulders, and she smiled suddenly. "You're nice to have around," she told him. "We're all kind of loony, and you keep our feet on the ground. You'll stay, won't you? Please."

"I've got San Antone on my mind," he said. "A man gets to thinking about a certain place in a certain way, building it up in his mind, thinking he'll find what he wants when he gets there."

"Must you look so far for what you want?"

"I don't know," he said, suddenly touching her again, making her look up.

He would have said more, but a guard came in off the bedground and spoke to him. "Bub says he'd like to speak to you, mister, if you'll oblige by ridin' out there. He's waitin'."

Todd nodded and climbed his horse, following the creek that emptied into the swollen Red River. Bub was waiting for him halfway out, near a deep, oily-looking pool surrounded by willows.

"It won't take me long to get off my chest what I got to say," Bub announced. "All that big talk Little Hand put on didn't bamboozle me."

"No? I thought he made a pretty good job of it."

"I seen him give you that paper. That's my tally-book paper. You jokers think you're pretty damn' smart, don't you?"

"Not especially," Todd confessed. "As

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I understand it, Bugsy Wode won it off you fair and square in a poker game"

"Fair and square! That tinhorn buzzard. God's sake! Who would think a dumb-lookin' ape like him could play that kind of poker? It was his dumb looks that sucked me in so deep."

"At any rate, you lost your shirt."

Bub winced. "That's right. So I'm goin' to clear out. Kerry'll beat me to death when she hears about it."

"It might be a good idea."

"At any rate, I called you out here to tell you to keep yore paws offn' her. She's affectionate, and if you take advantage, I'll fix you. I'll hear about it, and I'll kill you."

"You better stick around and watch me."

"There's nothing' to laugh about, mister. I don't make big talk. I do what I say."

"You better stay and think this through a little more."

"There's nothin' to think about. You're all crooks. Bugsy's squaw is Little Hand's daughter. Bugsy got into me. Little Hand gives you the I.O.U., and the rest is up to you. If you need any backing, Sam Wode's got a gang to make it stick. That's all there's to it."

"Why would Little Hand put on such a big show just to give me that I.O.U.? Didn't you hear him say Bugsy was dead?"

"I can't make head or tail out of that lingo, the way he spills it out."

"Hell, man, Little Hand had Bugsy's scalp on his belt. You got this all wrong. I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Bub. I'm going to give it back to you."

Bub's eyes suddenly lighted up, then darkened again. "Don't make me laugh," he muttered.

"Me either," a rough, rasping voice suddenly spoke up out of the willows. "I'll take it."

CHAPTER THREE

Poison Arrows

SAM WODE had small beady eyes, and long, straight hair like Bugsy. From all the talk he had heard about him, Todd was surprised to see how pesky and no-account looking he was—like a man who would get into a lot of small deviltry but shy away from anything that took real nerve.

He had six riders with him, half-breeds and white renegades, all wearing the same mean look and the same shabby gear. A pack of wolves, hungry and lean. They were short on nerve, and considerably over their heads in the play they were making against the Lazy W trail-herd.

They knew Bugsy was dead. Wode believed Cal Todd had done it. "I'm goin' to skin you alive, mister," he said, giving Todd a slap across the face after he had disarmed both of them. "I'm goin' to slice your damned ears off."

All of them almost dropped dead when they found Todd's money-belt and saw what was in it. Even Bub got quite a jolt, figuring as he did that Todd was little more than a dressed-up saddle bum. Wode gave each man two bills, and then pulled out his shirt, and strapped the belt around his waist.

"Godamighty, what a haul," he breathed, almost overcome by the windfall. "Just goes to show—you never know."

They threw a wide circle around the Lazy W herd, keeping out of sight, and then loped off down-river, their two prisoners roped hand to hand.

"Well," Todd remarked dryly to Bub Walden. "What do you think now?"

"I think this is a helluva note. It's got me stumped. Them buzzards are goin' to croak you."

"Shut up, both of you," Wode snarled.

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"Holy smoke! What a time we could have somewhere. Let's dig for Charlie Goss's."

"Not by a damn sight," Wode rasped. "We stay right here till we milk this dry. It gits easier an' easier. First we had nothin' except this paper Bugsy won off'n the little brat to make our play. Now we got these two jiggers, an' we got a full hand. Hell's Bells, we kin walk off with half that herd. mebbe the whole damn works. Let me think."

They reached a ramshackle place where there was a brush and mud hut, and a pole corral. It was surrounded by willows except on the river side, and now it stood inches deep under water. The animals in the corral splashed and sloshed around, nibbling tips of grass that stood out above the water.

A man named Riley, who had a fierce cold, tied Todd and Bub to a tree, walking round and round with his rope like a horse on a capstan. "Say so if I got it too tight."

"No, I guess it's all right," Todd said. "I feel comfortable. How about you, Bub?"

"I guess it's okay," Bub agreed.

Riley kicked some bones of slaughtered cattle that showed above the seep. "What a stink," he muttered. "It ain't healthy, that's all. It would kill a dog."

"You got the pip, right," Todd told him.

"It ain't the pip," Riley stated. "I just got a cough. Now if you buggers try to break loose I'll kick your heads off."

Wode sat on a stump counting out Todd's cash, getting more bug-eyed by the moment. Somebody came near him to watch, and he kicked out with his boot, and turned his back like a dog with a bone. The man dodged the boot, but didn't go away.

"That stuff's goin' to be divvied up eight ways, Sam," he stated.

"It ain't that kind of cash," Sam hedged. "We didn't make no play for it. It's just like I picked it up off'n the ground. Finders keepers."

SAM WODE finally got to his feet and sloshed to the tree, walking around it several times to see that they were securely tied. Then he gave Todd another clout in the face. His temper didn't seem to be behind it.

"Now I'm goin' back to your camp, gents, and speak my piece," he announced. "The girl, now. She's sister to you, ain't she?" He canted his head at Bub.

"Bugsy seen her," he went on, "an' got a case on her. He was fed up with his squaw anyway, an' I told him I'd see what I could do. I can't do him no good now. Any objection to me sparkin' her a little on my own account—object matrimony if she suits me?"

Bub's eyes lit with fury, and he strained against the rope, but all he got was a red face. He had to be content with a long blast of scorching profanity that Wode stopped with a limp slap, snapping his fingers so he drew blood. Then he turned on Todd.

"How about you? You got any objections? You ain't kin, are you?" He leered a little, his beady eyes narrowing, trying to find out if he had hit a vulnerable spot. Todd wouldn't let him see it.

"I'll git this I.O.U. paid off in stock, and I'll trade off this kid for what's left," Wode went on. "I don't see no loop holes in that."

"Look, Wode," Todd spoke up. "I've got more cash banked in Austin, twice what you got off me. We can settle this whole thing right here. My word's good. You can ask Tom Doan."

Sam Wode shook his head. "You'd double-cross me before I even seen your cash."

"I'll guarantee it," Todd insisted. "We

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can work it out so I can't double-cross you."

"Mebbe I'll make a deal with you later, but not for the Lazy W. I got that sewed up. I'll dicker with you for your hide. Riley, you stay here. Watch 'em close. Give 'em a little goin' over once in a while. Soften him up a little so we kin talk business when I git back. Show him I ain't nobody to fool with."

All except Riley rode off toward the Lazy W. Bub watched them go with a sour, smoldering look on his face. "Wouldn't it make you sick, gettin' hog-tied by a sorry bunch like that?" he muttered. "What d'you reckon they'll do?"

"Don't think about it, kid. Put your mind on the fix we're in."

"I don't see no way of thinkin' ourselves outa this one," Bub answered. "All the same, you made a good try. You hang around the Lazy W much longer an' you'll go broke."

Todd chuckled suddenly. "I guess it's Kerry, Bub. I'd be halfway to San Antone by now if it wasn't for her. I didn't give a whoop if you got rope-hauled from here to Dodge. I just wanted to get mixed up in her doings, so I cut the rope."

"One helluva way to spark."

RILEY stayed on the stump, his feet pulled up under him to keep out of the wet, his hand gun on the stump beside him. He had a jug of rotgut between his legs. Every now and then he threw it over his arm with a practiced twist and took a long swallow.

Once he went into the shack, and made himself some coffee. The tantalizing smell drifted out into the open. Todd tried to work some give into the rope, but it was too wet to budge. Time was running out. Wode had taken Todd's bear-tooth necklace with him, and a ring Bub wore, to show he wasn't bluffing. Once Kerry and her brothers made a deal with him and

got Bub safely back, they wouldn't back out of it.

Riley came back out. "I'll catch hell if I don't work you over," he announced. "Sam didn't give a whoop about Bugsy, but he likes to make out he did. You're in for."

Bub and Todd stared back, stoney-faced.

"Holy time! Speak up," Riley flared, trying to build up his nerve. He couldn't work it up big enough to make a start. He took another turn through the seep and kicked up a bone, knuckled at both ends. It fit his hand, and he came back.

Todd got a blow in the ribs that was comparatively harmless, but Bub let out a yell of fury and did some name-calling that bit into Riley. Todd began to wilt. The flat, sodden sound, and the occasional snap when Riley missed his aim and hit the tree, made a rhythm that pounded harder and harder in his brain.

It ended suddenly with a savage snap that brought his eyes open. He saw Riley spinning around in the water, trying to keep his balance, finally going down head-first in a puddle that turned red with his blood. There was a gaping bullet hole in his shoulder, and a simmer of smoke came out of the willows and drifted over them.

Riley wasn't dead. He clawed his way to the stump, got his back against it, and pulled his hand gun off the top. "By God, that does it," he yelled. "I'll croak the both of you."

"You'll answer to Wode if you do," Todd spoke up. "He's got a dicker on his mind, and it runs into big figures."

Riley waited. Todd searched the willows, but he couldn't see a thing. He couldn't hear anything, except the gurgle of water sliding past.

With his back to the stump Riley had some protection. However, a man could work himself around to the other side and

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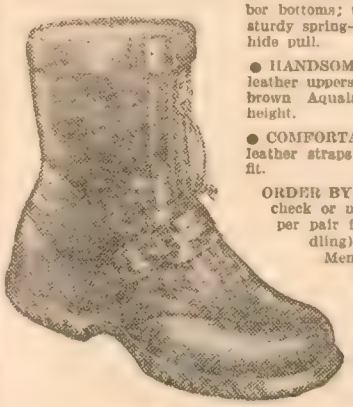

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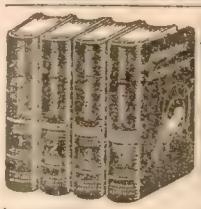

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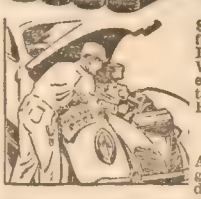

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get at him. He had a bad wound, and blood seeped down his shirt clear to his pants' belt.

"Anybody takes a shot at me," he said suddenly, "I'll blast the both of them."

He didn't get an answer, and yelled at Todd to give the same warning. Todd raised his voice, and called, "Take it easy, boys."

He got an answer, in the same barnyard Spanish Little Hand had used during his visit to the Lazy W camp. It almost brought a grin to Todd's face.

"What kinda talk's that?" Riley flared.

Todd spoke again, groping for words in an unfamiliar tongue, careful to keep out any English that Riley might understand. When he was through there was a long silence.

"I guess that doesn't get us anywhere," Bub muttered. "Wode's makin' hay, and it won't take him long to get back. Did you send 'em off?"

Todd shook his head. "Hold tight. It'll work out."

"You mean they're goin' to try it again?" Bub protested. "When Riley hears a shot he'll—"

He didn't get any further. Something swished past with a deadly hiss, and Riley suddenly sprouted feathers. Five arrows went into him, pinning him to the stump. One went through his neck. The rest peppered his chest and stomach. Tacked to the stump, he didn't move, and his gun hand went limp. The gun slid into the water.

"That's what I told 'em," Todd said. "To use their arrows."

CHAPTER FOUR

Lazy W Gun-Ruckus

AT FIRST Kerry Walden wouldn't talk to Sam Wode, not until he showed the bear-tooth necklace, and Bub's

ring, which had taken off the two prisoners.

"I'll put my cards on the table," he told her. "Considering what's gone on, I'll give you a square deal. That's the way I operate. Take it or leave it."

Rick and the twins stood by, scowling. Wode's renegades made a rough circle around them. Lazy W riders, except those on duty on the bed-ground, watched from a distance.

"What do you want?" Kerry asked, holding the two trinkets in her hand, her voice almost breaking with dismay.

"Yore herd," Wode announced bluntly.

Rick came in a step closer and gave Wode a long, puzzled look. Then he turned to the twins, and asked: "Did you hear what I heard?"

"I reckon so," Bren said. "I heard it, but I can't believe it."

"I'll take a bill of sale, fair and square," Wode went on, "and in return I'll give you this I.O.U. You'll see it's signed and all." He didn't let it out of his hand, but he showed it around, pointing at Bub's signature with a stubby finger.

Rick let out a strangled oath. Kerry's breath caught, and her hands twisted nervously. "What is this, anyway?" Rick demanded. "Where'd you get that?"

"Yore kid brother's a poker player," Wode remarked.

"It's no good," Rick flared. "He ain't of age. Even if it was, there's the rest of us. His share's only a fifth. You better clear out pronto."

Wode didn't move. "I don't go off half-cocked," he remarked. "If it ain't good, you'll make it good. Him and that other jigger croaked my brother to get it back. I grabbed 'em. It'll cost you the whole damned herd if you want to see that kid brother of yours again."

"All right," Kerry spoke up suddenly. "It'll have to be. Send them back here and you'll get your bill of sale."

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Wode shook his head. "Todd ain't part of the deal. I'll do my own dickering with him. He's got the cash to make his own deal."

"The herd for both of them," Kerry repeated. "Nothing else." She looked at Rick and the twins, and added: "My word is good for all of us. Take it or leave it."

Sam Wode was a man to grab too quickly at a small victory. He was short on the nerve it took to play for bigger stakes. But this looked liked something he could play out to the end, without much risk.

"I'm the one'll speak that take-it-or-leave-it piece, lady," he stated insolently, then glanced up at his men, and with a cranky sputter told them to back off. "Back off an' keep yore noses outa my business, you nosy buzzards. Back way off."

He waited until they pulled out of earshot. Then he went on in a lower voice, squirming a little as he spoke: "I ain't unreasonable. I'll play along with what you say, tit for tat, but in that case I want to speak for you."

Kerry looked puzzled, wondering what he was trying to get at. "I'm sure I don't understand."

"Well, I want you." He smirked a little, rolling his tongue along his yellow teeth, rubbing his stubble with a hard hand to make it sound like a whirring rattler, pushing his hair out of his sheepish, stubborn eyes. "That's been on my mind." There was a dead silence. Bren and Randie backed off, their eyes flashing bright fire.

"Mind, you two," Rick ordered, without giving them a look. "What, in God's name, do you mean by that?" he flared at Wode.

"Exactly what he says, of course," Kerry answered. There was something frightening growing in her eyes, the first wild lunging flashes of hysteria. Her

hands shook violently, but she forced herself to ease up.

"Give him the damn' herd, and get him out of here before I lose my head," Rick snapped.

"Nothin' to lose nobody's head over," Wode stated. "If you can't talk civil, I'll have somebody learn you some manners."

"You damn' stinkin' hydrophoby skunk!" Rick yelled.

"Shep!" Wode bellowed, his face flaming. "Learn him somethin'."

SHEP jumped his horse forward. The rest leveled off their guns. Shep's boot came out of the stirrup, and he kicked Rick in the jaw. Rick staggered back, going for his gun. The twins did the same. But Kerry's voice stopped it all.

"Sit down, Rick, there," she said. "Bren, you and Randie sit down."

They obeyed. Her face had gone dead white, but, gradually, in the silence, a little color came back. Shep moved back again.

"You'd think I was a damn' bum," Wode complained.

"It's an odd proposal of marriage," Kerry remarked, her voice steady again. "That's what it is, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah," Wode said. "Sure. That's the idea. We kin find a parson somewhere sometime."

A renegade snickered, and Wode glared wrathfully. "Ain't I told you to move back?"

Kerry seemed to consider the idea, pushing back the wild terror that threatened to engulf her. She turned and counted heads, but when she got through it changed nothing. The lives of two men were at stake, and each, in his way, was dearer to her than life itself.

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she refused, and it didn't explode into an open showdown, would there be some way to save Bub and Cal Todd?

She shuddered suddenly, seeing what little she had left.

She spoke up, her voice still under control. "I would need some time to consider something like that."

"I want an answer right now," Wode stated.

"But once I give my word it's given for good," she continued. "I must be sure of all the consequences."

"I told you," Wode rasped, his eyes glinting triumphantly. "I got 'em tied to a tree yonder. I told my man to shoot 'em down if we didn't get back with the right answer by sundown."

Even time was running against her. She had won what she needed. Rick saw it first. Cal Todd was riding in the lead, with Bub near him, offside in the saddle the way he did when he put on steam. The guards off the bedground were following. Wode's man, Shep, fired the first shot, and it put a hole through Todd's hat. Rick fired, and Shep went overboard, his spooked horse dragging him off.

One of the twins got hit. One renegade pulled out of the fight entirely without firing a shot, and kept going.

The racket flared and died, and flared again. The cook, bandy-legged Ozzie Wills, went down, yelling until his throat dried up. After some time, he pulled himself together, and went at it again.

Guns bucked and jammed, and Lazy W punchers cursed and yelled and poured lead. Horses bolted, and Wode's renegade crew crawled through the grass, hunting cover. A man sent his jammed gun clattering through the spokes of the chuckwagon. Wode got hit on the head.

Bub got hit, and Todd went after Wode, who was having a tough job keeping his feet under him. Wode's gun still bucked in his hand, but his aim was bad. Todd

got within ten feet of him before the renegade boss fired his last shot.

That was all. Punchers closed in a step at a time, peering through dust and smoke, searching tall grass for cover, prodding a dead renegade with a boot, holstering guns, and beginning to grin. Kerry got to her feet. As soon as Todd saw her he sat down flat and couldn't move.

Tom Doan said later he heard the racket clear over to his store. "Damned if I didn't think the war was startin' all over again."

Todd grinned at him. "I guess we're fixed. We wiped that whole bunch out without losin' a man, Doan."

"Best job you ever did," Doan stated. "And I heard you got most of your cash back, too."

Todd nodded, fingering his bear-tooth necklace. "This, too."

Bub looked at his ring, and said: "I got this off'n Wode's dead carcass."

"You did not," Todd stated. "Kerry had it."

"Oh, all right, all right." Bub muttered. "Anyway, that's where I got my I.O.U."

"I'll bet you've been teached not to gamble," Doan remarked.

Bub held up his hand, taking the oath. "When I git to Dodge I'm goin' to sit and watch. I kin take a hint."

"And—" Doan turned on Todd solemnly—"I reckon you'll be headin' for San Antone."

Todd nodded, just as solemnly, remembering his talk with Doan, remembering what he had told him about San Antone, like a place where his dreams would come true. He nodded again, and said: "Let's ride, Bub. They'll be crossing the river."

"Okay, boss," Bub said, grinning.

"Hey," Doan shouted, "that ain't the way to San Antone."

"A lot you know," Todd answered, seeing Kerry in the distance.

THE END

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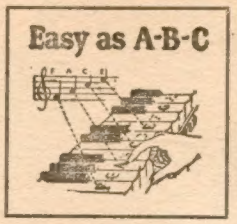

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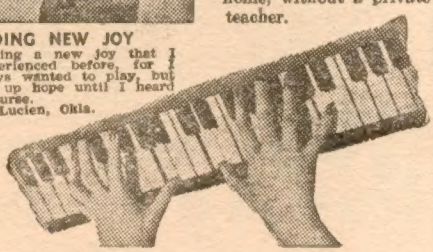

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(Continued from page 45)

right arm hung in a sling and he was a little pale around the mouth.

"Fine snappy mornin'," he said in his amiable growl. He wavered a bit but caught himself and walked straight to his place at the table. "I feel as hungry as a chaw-eared bobcat, kids. A good workout I had down in the Potholes. Lot of life left in the old man yet. Hey, Mr.—"

He checked himself and said, "Riley?" And he winked. "Guess you and me kind of cleaned things up." He fished a paper scrap out of his bathrobe pocket and pushed it toward his son-in-law. "Anson Biswell sent it this mornin'. Read it, son."

Riley did. The note said:

Dear Ferd:
I take back them cracks about you being old. And you're the best damned sheriff this county ever had. Good luck, pard.
Yours truly,
A. Biswell.

Nora was clattering dishes at the stove. "Two eggs, father?" Her voice had a singing quality, a kind of lilt.

"Three," roared the sheriff and winced with pain at the effort. Then he peered hard at Riley and said, "I'm retirin', Riley. Like I said I would. You're a good man and deserve your chance to show the voters of this county what you c'n do. 'Course I c'd go on for another ten years or so, but it's time I done some travelin'.

"I got a brother down-state I ain't seen in a long time. I aim to spend a year punchin' cattle for a change. You'll take over the office as actin' sheriff startin' today."

He chuckled like a gruff old lion with a joke in his throat. " 'Course, if you should happen to need my help any time, son, I'll come a-runnin' and don't you think I won't!"

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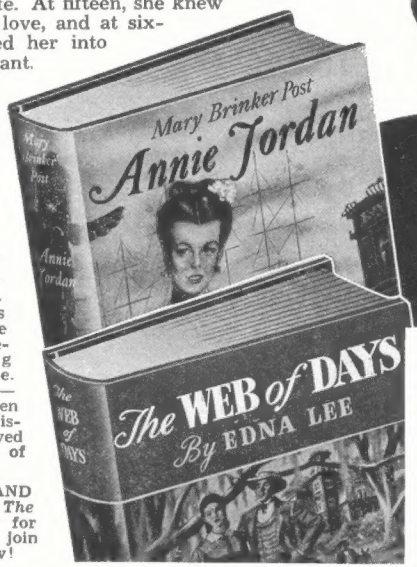

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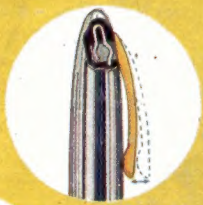

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